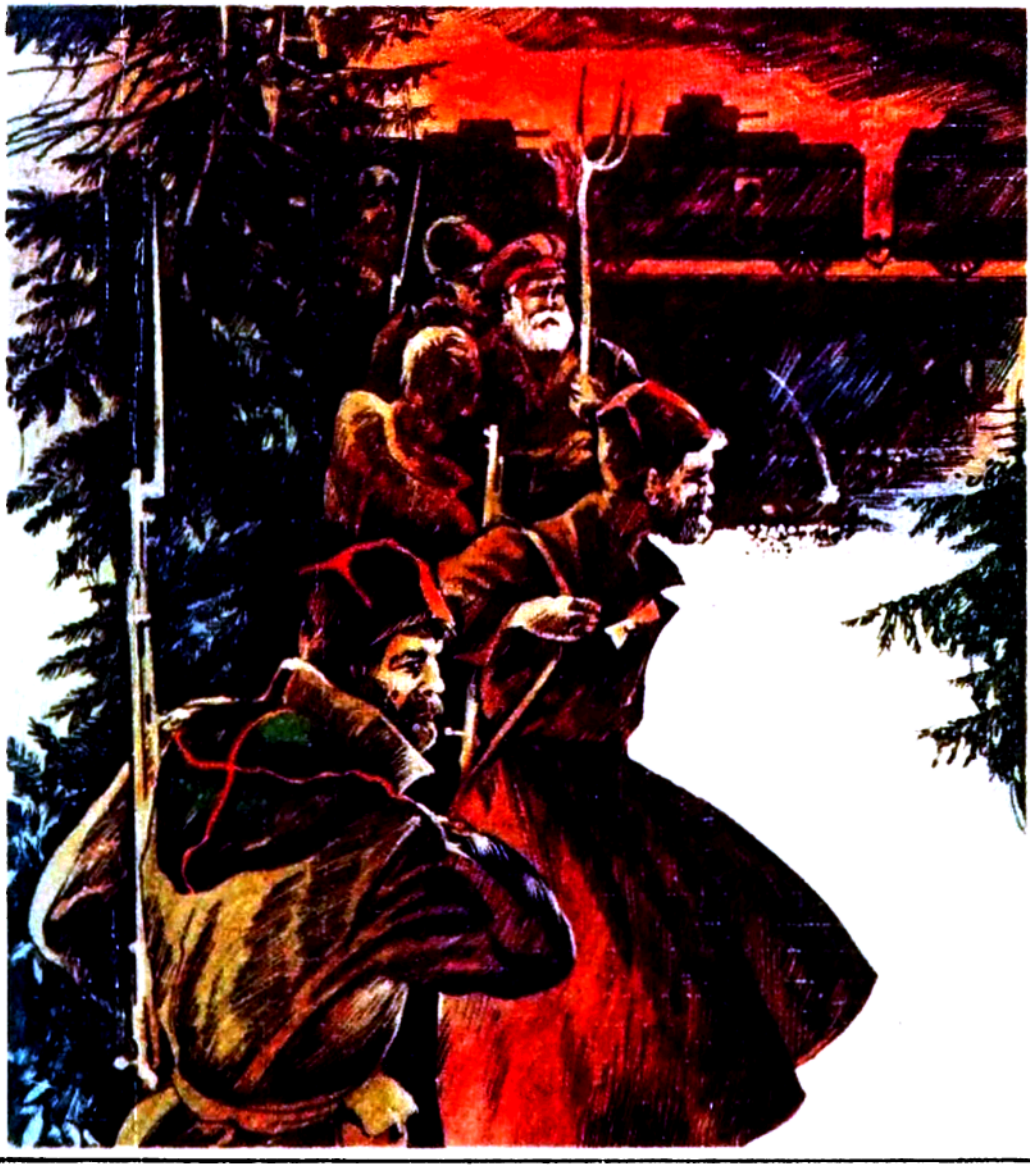
RUSSIAN AND SOVIET Story

Vsevolod Ivanov

SELECTED STORIES



Raduga Publishers Moscow

Vsevolod Ivanov (1895-1963), like many other Soviet writers of the older generation, appeared on the literary scene soon after the 1917 Revolution. During the Civil War he fought in Siberia, the Altai, and Central Asia.

In his writing he introduced new themes, a new imagery, and a profound understanding of the heroic spirit of ordinary people. His best known works are the novellas *Partisans, Armoured Train 14-69, Coloured Winds,* the novels *Parkhomenko, Sky-Blue Sands, Journey into the Land that Does Not Yet Exist,* and many short stories, which became a landmark of Soviet writing.

As Victor Shklovsky, an old friend, who introduces this collection, wrote: "He was above immediate circumstances and always true to the spirit of revolution".

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Translated from the Russian

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ВСЕВОЛОД ИВАНОВ

ИЗБРАННЫЕ РАССКАЗЫ

На английском языке

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VICTOR SHKLOVSKY ON VSEVOLOD IVANOV

I heard about Vsevolod Ivanov from Gorky.

It was winter and Gorky's study in Kronverksky Avenue was spacious and chilly. There was a bookcase by the wall and the manuscripts of writers-to-be on the table. Gorky spoke of the future, stroking the manuscripts with his palm. He liked the way Vsevolod Ivanov worked, going straight ahead without looking over his shoulder.

Vsevolod had reached Petrograd with great difficulty, crossing the entire country from East to West by changing from one train to another. He was probably penniless and Gorky gave me some money with the request that I hand it to Vsevolod. As yet he had nowhere to live and I should have to locate him not at a particular address but from the way he looked.

"What does he look like?" I asked.

"He looks like a person who has fallen asleep by camp fires and been scorched by them," Gorky told me. "He wears a greatcoat and his face is like that of a Kazakh."

I walked along the street. The city was gaunt and empty. In the square, behind the former Winter Palace, the Alexander Column had a new look. On the anniversary of the October Revolution Natan Altman had attached a plywood structure to its foundation, which made the column look as if it were broken. The bronze sailing ship on the sharp spire of the Admiralty sailed in persuit of a frosty sun. It was sailing into the future, alone but in a new way.

I came out on to Nevsky Prospekt and as I crossed Gostiny Dvor I saw a Red Army man on the other side of the deserted avenue, where Liteiny Avenue enters Nevsky Prospekt. He was broad-shouldered and wore boots and puttees and a short greatcoat with holes scorched in it.

"Are you Vsevolod Ivanov?" It was my guess.

"Yes," the man said. "What do you want?"

"Gorky describes people well".

His descriptions are not long, but they include what is characteristic.

Vsevolod was a heroic personality. His experience encompassed partisan life and the mortal dangers of the anti-Kolchak under-

ground. Before him stood long years of labour as the literary pioneer of Siberia.

In the last century Chekhov travelled over the deep, mud-filled ruts of Siberia on his way to Sakhalin. An enormous unknown land spread out before him on every side, coming to life in obscure rumours, in exuberant songs or in bold prophecies. Remarkable people went to Siberia of their own free will or otherwise. But Siberia remained without a literary voice.

Vsevolod remembered seeing, as a boy, a bear in the taiga. The trees crackled and he saw a bear advancing straight towards Vsevolod's family. His father, axe held high, stood in front of his wife and children, and the bear, shaking its head, passed by. The story of Siberia, this self-willed bear of a land, armed with the axes of its stalwart peasants, unsubdued by the armoured might of Kolchak, was told harshly and truthfully by Vsevolod Ivanov.

"The people around are enormous," he observed, "as broad as the land, made of tough flesh." These people came into literature from a life full of tragic contradictions, where the new did not yield itself ready-made but grew, slowly pushing aside the slabs, out of the the old.

Vsevolod Ivanov's *Partisan Stories,* reflecting the heroism of revolutionary struggle, were widely read. Vsevolod surprised every-

one by the quiet tone of one novella. Partisans take an American soldier prisoner. Imagining that, since the truth is indivisible, everyone must agree with them, the partisans explain to the prisoner by means of pictures what revolution is. Then, having "indoctrinated" him, they release him without even binding his eyes.

The people of the revolution were harsh but trusting...

Vsevolod Ivanov was an unpredictable artist. He made an impact on us, his audience—Fedin and Tikhonov and Zoshchenko and the young Veniamin Kaverin—with the very first story he read, his very first sentence. We remembered it from his lips and subsequently repeated it often. We thought we had remembered it correctly. "Palms don't grow in Siberia! " But now, as I re-read the old story, I see that in Vsevolod's work this sentence has an even more unexpected and complex ring. "Palms don't take root in Siberia..." In Vsevolod's writing Siberia is populated with trees. It is populated with animals, rivers and clouds, just as it is with people.

Vsevolod showed us that in Siberia not only are palms not grown—even the pine tree lives its own life. People, too, grow up in their own way, dreaming their own dreams of happiness. Everything the author wrote is illuminated by these dreams.

Mankind generally is impatient, thirsting

after happiness now. But real happiness is not easily won. Vsevolod wrote a story called "The Seventh Bank", the title of which was taken from a legend. A hero swims three rivers: the river of birth, the river of study and the river of work. Only then does he emerge on to the bank of the river of happiness—the seventh bank. The title was given to an anthology. Although Vsevolod later withdrew the story from the anthology, the title remained. He thought that critics would know the legend and be able to interpret the title. However, he exaggerated the knowledge of critics and the degree of their interest.

The critics could have been more perceptive in general. Vsevolod's work, it seems, has still not been read the way it should be. Not only does he have a present and a past—he also has a future.

That is how it is in life.

There are authors who write a single book. Such books are easier to write, for they spring from personal experience of life. A second book requires mature mastery: but this is not within everyone's grasp. And there are authors who are born anew each time their new book comes out. One such was Vsevolod Ivanov. Each time he began anew and to this day I anticipate a new understanding of him.

When we were young we would greet each other with the words: "Hallo, brother! It's hard to write..." As the years passed Vsevolod

did not find writing any easier. His "Armoured Train" appeared very early in Soviet literature, setting its future course of writing and shaping its new countenance. Perhaps repetition was expected from the author. But he did not repeat himself and refused to let himself resting on laurels. He sought new strata to mine, new methods of work. I am struck by the variety of his writing. Features of the future Platonov can be discerned in Vsevolod Ivanov's merciless realism, while his last pieces put one in mind of Petronius and Chesterton...

Vsevolod was already well over 60 years of age when he went 800 kilometres down a dangerous Siberian river. I heard his account of this journey: it was unusually lively, gifted and unliterary. He remained young in art. I shall be precise: this took place in 1962, a year before his death.

Vsevolod possessed immense creative passion, which he combined with the calm of Buddha. He was a man of inner depth, free, created by nature in the same way it unhurriedly creates whales and crystals.

He was above immediate circumstances and always true to the spirit of revolution.

I am thinking of Vsevolod Ivanov and his road to the seventh bank, I am casting my mind back...

Happiness is a difficult thing. Remembering happiness is hard, too.

Victor Shklovsky

STORIES

TEMERBEY THE KIRGHIZ

Temerbey was sleeping on a felt mat when his little son came running to him crying tearfully as he plucked at the sleeve of his father's coat:

—Eh, apa! The horse is gone.

Temerbey wasn't sleepy, but all the same (so that his son would not think that his father was *really* worried) he turned over and mumbled lethargically:

—Be off! I'm tired.

But his little son continued tearfully to tell him that he had hobbled the horse and released it into the steppe—however, it had broken its hobble and run away! And he waved the hobble, which was plaited from horse hair.

—The horse is gone, apa.

Temérbey went on lying there for as long as was necessary, then stood up, felt the coarse hobble and hung it on the partition.

—How much longer are the Russians going to fight? They're out at elbows, their bellies are as bare as watermelons—feh!

Temerbey knew that the horse would not have wandered far and decided to set off on foot: the horse was quiet and could be captured without a lassoo. He tightened his belt, cast a proprietorial eye around, took a halter and went into the steppe.

Temerbey's aul was small: seven dark-grey, mushroomlike yurts. Slender-legged foals dozed by the stake fence, their moist eyes half-covered by pink lids. There was a smell of dried dung and sheep.

Beyond the fence lay the steppe—sand that burned the feet and whitish sky that was cloudless and for that reason eery. The day had only just begun, but the heat was as great as it had been towards evening the previous day and the short night seemed never to have been.

Temerbey walked for a long time, wondering where he could get some tea and mentally choosing the ram he would take to the Cossacks for barter—perhaps they had tea. All the while the black pupils in the narrow slits of his eyes roved the steppe in search of the horse. He felt some sand under his heel inside his boot and, putting his crooked leg to one

side, he inclined his head and looked down. Just above the heel his *ichig* had split by the tendon.

—Ach! Temerbey smacked his lips discontentedly.

He pulled up a clump of dry grass and stuffed it into the rent. As he pulled up the grass the thought returned to him that the steppe was suffering a drought and that since the very beginning of spring (and soon summer would be over) there had been no rain. A feeling of gloom came over him and he began to walk more quickly in order to be home sooner.

He had covered about eight *versts* when he met a Kirghiz who said:

Temerbey! Kizmet caught your horse and drove it home to you.

Kizmet and Temerbey had long been in dispute and this news did not please him.

—Why's he doing me a favour? I would have found it myself, Temerbey said, walking away from the Kirghiz.

His acquaintance wanted to offer Temerbey a ride to his aul, but when he saw his discontented face and the two tufts of hair turned up on his chin he parted with him.

—Kosh!

And he lightly touched his horse with a short thick whip. The horse gave a cheerful wave of its tail and ambled briskly off.

Temerbey was now indignant both with Kizmet and with the man for not offering him

a ride. Without knowing why he walked further into the steppe. After he had covered half a verst his temper calmed, but as soon as he grew calm he became aware of a feeling of tiredness.

He climbed a hill and lay down in some dense karagach bushes. True, they cast a meagre shadow and smelt of resin. Temerbey was sleepy. He put some snuff in his cheek, shifted the soft lump about his gums and soon there was a pleasant fog in his brain.

—Well, now! he said in a satisfied voice, spitting.

Then he took off his coat and rolled it up into a ball, remaining in a dirty calico shirt and sheepskin trousers with the fur on the outside. He levelled the sand with his hand, put his head on his jacket and fell asleep, murmuring "Good! ".

He was awakened by horses' hooves and by some other strange, unfamiliar sound, as if two kettles were striking against each other. Temerbey looked down into the hollow.

Eleven men were riding towards the hill on top of which, in the karagach bushes, Temerbey was lying. That is, Temerbey, who was half-asleep, thought they were—two of the eleven were on foot and one did not even have a cap. Among those accompanying the two on foot Temerbey recognised several acquaintances from the Cossack village. He wanted to come out of the bushes and greet

them, but the strange sound repeated itself.
–Drynn! Drynn!
A Cossack swayed in his saddle and struck his sword against the stock of his rifle, taking up the song:

Mother Volga's wide,
Wide and deep...

The Cossack's face was round, with small moustaches the colour of raw hide; it wore a cheerful smile. No doubt both his own singing and the sound produced when he struck the rifle with his sword gave him pleasure.
As he examined him Temerbey noticed that all the Cossacks had guns while the two men on foot were unarmed and the thought came to Temerbey that it would be better not to emerge.
The men and the horses went down into the hollow and a Cossack with a beard that was gleaming and clean like the tail of a two-year-old foal and white ribbons sewn to his shoulder said something in Russian, after which all the Cossacks began to dismount. The horses were taken away into the steppe and hobbled there.
Temerbey thought that the Cossacks probably wanted to brew tea and again he wanted to come out of the bushes, but he reflected: "Why didn't I come out straight away? They'll call me a coward and laugh at me."
He had great self-respect and a feeling of

shame came over him: so he remained where he was.

A younger Cossack brought two spades with short, flattish handles.

He struck one against the other, knocking off the clay that had dried on the blades, then handed them to the two men on foot.

One was tall, without a cap, wearing black trousers rolled down on to his boots. He stood with his feet wide apart, his clean-shaven, sharp-nosed face lowered. The bottoms of his trousers were very wide and his boots almost vanished in these large pieces of cloth. He wore an outgrown double-breasted jacket with gleaming buttons, like a government official, the collar of his shirt turned down on his jacket. His shirt was of white canvas and the deep collar lay on his back, covering his shoulder blades, and this collar was blue with white edges. The man's face was tanned that special brown tan acquired by those who were first to come to Turkestan. No doubt the sun had beaten down on his head and because of this he often twitched his faded, almost white brows and tightly squeezed his eye-lids.

The second man was shorter than his companion, with a puffy, greyish face. He was snub-nosed and his thick lips smiled constantly, as if against his will. He was dressed in the same way as the Cossacks, in trousers and a shirt the colour of autumn grass with a tight

military cap, a faded red ribbon on the peak, stuck up on the crown of his head.
The Cossack with white ribbons on his shoulders measured out three paces and said something in Russian, stamping his foot. The small man approached and jabbed with a spade at the ground where the Cossack had stamped. The Cossack moved away and stamped his foot again and the man again jabbed with his spade. The second man turned away from his companion, holding his spade under his arm and gazing, almost without blinking, into the steppe. Temerbey could not understand whether his expression was one of boredom or something else.
The other Cossacks lay and smoked, passionately discussing something among themselves. From the scraps of Kirghizian speech inserted from time to time into the conversation Temerbey grasped that they were talking about the haymaking and the unfair distribution of haymaking plots by the elders. One Cossack, noticing that the man without a cap was staring fixedly into the steppe, raised his fist and threatened him.
The man without a cap turned and looked at his companion. The small man had already marked out a quadrangle and the black earth that had been turned up resembled the lid of a long, broad box, thrown down amid the green carpet of grass in the hollow.
Then the two men took the spades and began

to dig. The Cossacks lay where they were and argued about the plots.

The Cossack with the white ribbons on his shoulders sat three paces away from the men: he held a rifle in his hands and put his cap on his knees. His brick-red face with its sparse moustaches expressed hidden pleasure, as if for the first time, he were the guest of some high official, but, on the other hand, he probably felt a keen desire to go home; the steppe had wearied him with its hot sun and he wanted shade. He glanced several times at the karagach bushes where Temerbey was lying, but they were far away—twenty or twenty-five paces—and he did not want or could not walk over to them. He sat in the Kirghiz fashion, his legs tucked under him, and his coarse, dirty fingers on the stock of his rifle.

Meanwhile, the two men continued to dig, stooping low over the ground. Damp black earth threaded with gleaming grass roots flew into the air and fell with a loud thwack. A mound of the upturned earth was already visible, but Temerbey still could not fathom why this pit was being dug.

The short man dropped his spade and the tall man, bending swiftly, gave it to him. Irritation at dropping his spade and pleasure at the service rendered him flickered across the snub-nosed face of the short man.

The tall man flung the earth a long way and

was evidently working unwillingly: the Cossack indicated to him lazily with his hand that he should pile the earth closer. Temerbey immediately recognised a good husbandman. Why, indeed, throw the earth so far if it was needed for filling in the hole—that was just unnecessary work. But the tall man paid no attention and continued to fling the earth a long way, as if with malice. Temerbey didn't like such a disobidience. The Cossack said no more and Temerbey thought:

"It's probably government work, since they treat it like that."

The short man, however, was working better. He was taking full spades of earth without hurrying and piling them neatly, sometimes patting them down on top, and when the spade struck the earth he smiled with his thick lips. He soon began to sweat and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt before rolling up his sleeves. The tall man threw off his jacket and tossed it to one side. The young, round-faced Cossack who had woken Temerbey by his singing jumped up and quickly seized the jacket. His haste seemed incomprehensible and sinister to Temerbey. The Cossack displayed the jacket with the air of one who now owned it.

Temerbey's head was beginning to ache from the awkwardness of his position in the bushes, from the sun and from the unaccustomed length of time that he had been thinking. He

was thirsty, too, but he was afraid to emerge. He closed his eyes, but that only made things worse. Now it seemed that the Cossack would come into the bushes and ask loudly:
—What are you spying on us here for, Temerbey?
Again he looked at the two men working.
The short man had no doubt become tired. He pulled a dirty rag from his pocket and wiped off the sweat, breathing hard as people always do after heavy digging. He raised his head and looked around. His face was twisted with pain and his eyes were reddened; the tall man noticed this and pointed grimly at the ground: get on with it! The short man ceased sighing and went on digging.
The Cossacks were tired of their argument about the haymaking. In ones and twos they approached the pit, glanced in and cursed loudly. Temerbey understood Russian curses and when the Cossacks swore he thought this meant they were not satisfied with the slow pace of the work. This had begun to weary Temerbey as well and he wanted the pit to be dug quickly and the men to go away so that he, too, could go home and drink a cup or two of kumiss in his cool yurt sitting propped against boxes on a white, soft felt mat, and then visit his neighbours and tell them what he had seen. Or, even better, he would invite the neighbours to his yurt.
But for a long time now the thought had been

swirling about inside Temerbey's head: "Why are they digging? What for? Who for?" And now the thought swelled, like a river at flood-tide, and swamped everything and thoughts about the aul, his cattle and his little son only bobbed and trembled like lone branches sticking out above the water.

The guns in the Cossacks' hands, the spades scratching the earth and the man with the white ribbons all somehow joined together in a flash and seemed to shout in Temerbey's face the foul word:

"Kill! "

In some way Temerbey understood all this in a moment and when he understood he became frightened. He felt alone and at the same time linked to the people who were carrying out the murder, but he didn't have the strength to say "I don't want to". And Temerbey felt as if he were eating carrion and nausea even began to tickle his throat.

The two *kyzyl-urus*, Red Russians, continued working.

The short man was already up to his waist in the ground and since there was no room for two men to work in the pit, the man without a cap stood on the edge and gazed at the steppe over the hills and bushes. Temerbey could see more clearly from where he was lying on the hill and he thought that the tall man was probably waiting for someone to come out of the steppe: Temerbey felt sorry for the men

and he looked in the secret hope of seeing someone there.
There was no-one.
The sparse wormwood was grey on the pink sand. A sky the colour of skim milk breathed deeply and hotly and the heated air was almost visible to the eye.
The tall man went on looking and looking, as if he wanted to fly away into the steppe as far as his gaze would take him. Temerbey was fearful of looking at his strong body and his sunburnt face, which was like a worn boot-top.
One of the Cossacks swore and the tall man jumped into the pit to replace his tired companion. The puffy-faced man also looked into the steppe, then turned around. He squatted on the earth that had been thrown up and his face smiled piteously, as if compelled.
The Cossack with the white tapes on his shoulders shouted something in Russian. The other Cossacks, their faces immediately serious, jumped up, seized their guns and formed up in line, like foals tethered to a line of stakes. They were clearly pleased to be standing like that and obeying the dreary shout of the senior Cossack. They understood that soon they would go away and lying there in the heat had wearied them.
When they heard the shout and saw the movement the men who were digging jumped out of the pit and the tall man flung his spade

violently to one side, so that it cut edgeways into the ground. They glanced at each other almost simultaneously and stood on the edge of the pit.

"They will be killed," Temerbey thought and he felt ashamed to know these Cossacks by name and by face and to think that somewhere they would meet each other again. He tried to press himself closer to the ground, bending the fragile bushes. His heart beat so hard that its thumping seemed to reverberate in the ground and his body became cold and his head ached as if in the bitterest frost.

A dry twig crackled beneath Temerbey's hands, his body became completely limp and he watched with an open, wet mouth as the eight with their guns took their stand opposite the two and the senior Cossack stepped to one side and prepared to shout, meanwhile pulling at his shirt.

The tall man stretched out his hand to the short one, who held it, then released it somehow unwillingly and turned away. The tall man jerked his chin, as a horse does to make its bridle more comfortable, and took a step forwards. At this moment the senior Cossack cried out and as soon as he shouted the eight Cossacks fired simultaneously and Temerbey screwed up his eyes. They seemed to be firing at him and he even felt a sharp pain in his shoulder.

When he made up his mind to look the two

men were no longer there and two Cossacks were filling in the pit with spades. However, the work soon wearied them and after scraping the earth from the spades with the soles of their boots they went up to the horses and galloped off to catch up the other Cossaks, who had ridden away into the steppe.

Temerbey did not come out of the bushes for a long time, but then he rose, descended the hill and approached the grave, leaving footprints in the damp earth.

The dead men were almost covered with earth; only a hand stuck out of the ground—one of the men had probably fallen on his back and stretched his hand upwards. The hand was white with a yellowish tinge and there was a dark spot of blood in a scratch on the thumb.

Temerbey bent down to finish burying the bodies somehow or other, but scarcely had he touched the ground than he remembered that white hand with its long fingers, recoiled from the grave and felt how his unyielding, suddenly sweaty legs, rapidly giving way under him, were carrying him into the steppe. He ran and at the same time was totally gripped by a feeling of something large and vague, an awareness that the most terrible thing of all would begin now, that by this grave he had buried the erstwhile, quiet, peaceful Kirghiz Temerbey...

1921

THE GULLIES

I

She would go into the yard, to the bathhouse, throw off her blouse and look at herself: the flesh sat solidly on her bones, scarlet, like a guelder rose, and smelling of the large autumn moss.
She would say sadly:
—Why is it miserable? What for?
And the sky was as white as white, whiter than milk. The ground below set fire to it, breathing on it with over-ripe breath. The people all around were huge, broad, like the earth, made of hard flesh. They strode conquerors, across the fields, mocking smiles sticking out of their beards. *They* were at peace.
Take her husband, Pyotr, for example—his beard was black, as if manured—he was like

land left unploughed for a hundred years. And he would say, as if pulling out roots:
—There's a good harvest now, my lads. Sent by God!
Or old man Yemolych—a Kazan khan. As bald as a hill, cunning and guarding his tongue as the earth guards treasure. Not a word from him.
His coat was Kirghizian, multi-coloured, on his feet he wore ichigs and he did not walk—he flew. His horse was a pacer, as light as if made of paper.
And he brought whit him all the tribute of the town.
He would bring it packed into a trunk sheathed in coloured tin, his bald head smiling. But his face, like his crown, did not move.
Pyotr would say to him:
—Let 'em rebel. Our land is rich, but the town—it will come to us. Their rebellions are none of our business. Aksiniya walked past her husband; she would look into his eyes, which were like a well in the steppe, dry and dark. And at night, when he squeezed her, pressing and unsteadily breathing on her body, she closed her eyes. Then she became utterly afraid.
Granny Fyokla walked about the yard: this year the chicken was laying its eggs without rhyme or reason and she had to search for them. She fumbled in the mouldy earth, the

dry, acrid manure, the straw. Her lips fluttered and rustled slowly like the straw.
—Kiddies are born without legs in Roosia, they say. Eh, Ksin?
—I don't know.
People don't know anything nowadays! In the old days at least they paid attention to their elders, but now they have their own ideas. The people have gone to seed.
—The time hangs heavy, granny!
—You just light a candle upside down to Mikola Mirlikiysky and Pantilimon. Put the evil eye on them, he has, the Anti-Christ has put the evil eye on all of Roosia!
And again she fumbled about in the straw, making it rustle.
—I've no strength or I'd go into the wood. You go at least, Ksin.
—What for? To see a bear, maybe?
—To gather mushrooms! In the town they eat mushrooms instead of bread, they're going entirely to the devil! You should gather mushrooms and exchange them for a velvet dress or may be a silk one, eh?
—What do I need silk for? That's dull.
The house was huge and dark, as if it had been hewn out of stone. It had a constant rasping smell of bread. All summer the windows stood wide open, but the smell did not go away.
And the village itself was huge, too. The woods and the corn fields stretched for verst

after verst.
Emaciated people with wide-mouthed, empty sacks came from the town when the famine began.
—God will provide, the village replied.
They ceased to come. The dogs were bored, with no one to bark at. And those who came envied them:
A dog is fed more in a day than we are given for a week.
—Don't rebel, then!
And the shaggy-legged dogs tore the boots of the departing. Melancholy and vast emptiness.

II

On a yellow evening—a sandy wind was blowing from the south—the Kirghizians came out of the steppe.
High-wheeled heavy camel-drawn carts screeched. People thin as lathes, dried-out, lay crowded together in them on thin, threadbare mats.
Skin that was peeling off in layers, like alabaster, covered sharp bones. Sand blew in a thick blanket over the torn sheepskins covering the bodies.
—No *khlep*... they said.
Their voices were like the wind in the hills, whistling and lonely.

—There's no bread!
The men thrust their bare feet, covered in dusty hair, wide apart into the earth and looked at the ringworm and scabs.
As they walked away they said of the Kirghizians:
—They won't survive...
Pyotr said to the Kirghizians:
—Drive on!
—*No nan! No khlep...*
The wind tore tufts of wool from rents in their coats. Camel hair also slipped from their hats. The camels, thin and with slackly hanging humps, were naked and their skin was wrinkled, like the sun in a drought.
Pyotr met Aksiniya at the gate and silently stepped to one side. Old man Yemolych followed him and announced pompously, his bald head smiling:
—I'd exchange them grain for one of their camels, I say! They don't want to, though, the godless swine. Not enough, they say, eh? A pood of wheat isn't enough for one of them heathen's camels.
—Drive them away and make an end of it.
—Right! They'll bring plague!
—When are you going into the town to trade?
The Kirghizians sat on the grass by their carts.
A curly-haired Cossack called Senka Ubychev cut thick slices of bread with a knife made

from a saw. One after the other, he threw the slices unhurriedly on to the grass.
The Kirghizians greedily seized the bread from the ground together with the grass. They chewed with their entire bodies—shoulders, chests, legs.
The curly-haired Senka threw the slices on to the ground, shouting:
—Gobble them up, come on! Eat your fill, eat...
But those lying in the carts were silent and their chests jutted out sharply under the dirty sheepskins.
The Kirghizians thanked him as they seized the slices of bread:
—*Shchikur, Senka, shchikur.* Thank you.
The cattle on the Irtysh drank warm water, dipping their dusty muzzles into the stream. Water ran from their muzzles on to their coats and their eyes, too, were like enormous dark drops.
And curly-haired Senka Ubychev went on cutting bread.
—Gobble it up! God is one, beliefs are different! Eat.
—*Berna, berna* ... the Kirghizians mumbled.
—True.
Senka noticed Aksiniya.
His hair, faded like feather-grass, floated up in the wind above his wide-cheekboned face. His eyes opened, blue, large, like wet saucers.

What do you want? he asked. Why have you come?
Her smile reddened and went from her face to her high bosom, as high as an old-time porch. Her entire body trembled with a joyful shiver.
—It's nothing!
She walked away, treading down the grass, and the grass withered under her foot. "There is still pity in the world," she thought. ...And in the stifling purple night, creeping, she scooped up a bag of grain from the barn. Bending low over the sparse grass, setting her fingers in the warm sand, she was barely able to carry the bag to the caravan.
There her head was engulfed by the smell of dried manure and ayran.* The hungry Kirghizian dogs began barking softly. She could not restrain herself. She put the bag down and ran. The Kirghizians lifted up the bag and hid it.

III

The gullies forged rings of dark, rich earth around the village—wedding bands or fetters. There was grass in the gullies—the cattle strayed and the milk they brought back from them was thick, like sour cream, and sweet, like honey.

*Sour milk (Turk.)—*Tr.*

The mushrooms were enormous and their flesh firm. (In earlier years Ataman Chernyaev had sent them to the tsar as a present, so the story went. But the digestive track inside the tsar hadn't been suitable for mushrooms and the metropolitans had eaten them. However, Ataman Chernyaev had been presented with a string of diamonds for the mushrooms.)
The road wound through the gullies among the bushes and the birch trees southwards...
Grass consumed the road. And it would have swallowed it up had it not been for the Kirghizians and old man Yemolych—they rode along it to the town.
And the gullies squeezed the road, decorating the ruts with thistles.
The blue, prickly thistle caught on the wheels.
Aksiniya began to go into the gullies, as if looking for the cattle.
She would walk through the birch wood and the hawthorn— its smell seemed to catch at her dress and get into her hair. And before her eyes was the road—wretched, thin, like those Kirghizians on their camel-drawn carts, hungry.
Thoughts caught against the road, like thistle on the wheels, the heart withered in bitter, acrid wormwood:
—Lord... Where are the people, then? Those who feel pity... Aksiniya walked, languished.
—Lord! Perhaps your eye is scorched, too, like this steppe here? Eh? In the towns, they say, people gnaw the ground, stones, dry and

hard... And, anyway, life is in truth being made over... Why is it like this, Lord? Just look, half the land here has been ploughed up for grain... They rip through the woods, as if there isn't enough ploughland... But people are greedy, all greedy... Curse our impudence!
Curly-haired Senka—alone, a red stripe adorning his trouser leg, bent over, stood at a distance, throwing great slices to the Kirghizians. And the eye of the curly-haired man was blue and sorrowful... Aksiniya walked, bending under the bushes.
The hawthorn smelt of her heart, her melancholy, but the greedy gullies breathed damply, pressing grasses, birch trunks and the marvellous presentation mushrooms to themselves...
He, too, the curly-haired one, tormented her heart.
And the road as well, vanquished by grass. And the sand, with the hungry Kirghizians, and more than anything—the town... Should she have a look at what life was like there?
Aksiniya walked and wept:
—Lord! Perhaps your eye is scorched and you can't see! Where are they, your eyes, Lord!
The rustling grass embraced her legs. The hawthorn embraced her head, dropping heavy, soft berries on to her crown. Ducks quacked in the grass.
—Scorched, perhaps, Lord?

The Lord was silent, mute. Incomprehensibly deaf. And only the gullies spoke greedy and unkind words.

IV

The curly-haired man met Aksiniya outside the village, his blue eyes swimming, melting in the sky.

Taking a stroll, Aksiniya Semyonovna?

—I'm calling in the cattle... The cattle are in the gullies.

He stood by the hawthorn, the bush curly, too—the berries soft... "And what are the curly-haired one's lips like?"

Aksiniya bent down and then raised her eyes unhurriedly. The curly-haired man's soul grew dark, dark and sinister, as it was in the darkest gully.

And they separated. She went into the gullies, he to the village.

But the next time he sat down opposite her, in the grass.

—Does your husband trade, then? he asked. There was a smell of hops on his lips: either he was mocking or he was envious.—Do your people trade?

—Our people?

—Well?

—They exchange things in the town. But that's unjust, Sensha! They're making

money out of hunger, that's what!
—And Pyotr?
She remembered Pyotr, his beard of black earth. Heavy legs, straight, like trees, striding. There was a feeling in her chest of over-strain... and old man Yemolych, the Kazan khan, she remembered him, too... What greed!
The curly-haired one chuckled.
—Why are you laughing, Aleksandr Grigorich?
—They're a funny lot, you can't fathom them at all!
Aksiniya said:
—My soul is rotting, Aleksandr Grigorich, and I just can't understand... I doubt...
—Something wrong on the farm?
—No, not at all!
—Granny—Granny Fyokla—is a pain in the neck, I suppose?
—That isn't it, either. It's something else.
—Well, what, then?
—I've an ache inside, there's no rest for me... I can't find...
The curly-haired one grinned and moved his foot...
—That happens... The flesh...
His face twitched. His hands shook and his lips became wet.
He put his hand on her knee. No strength to take it away...
...And then, just like Pyotr, he pressed and kneaded her body, spraying saliva. And, like Pyotr, he flung himself back, breathing

sweatily towards the sky.
Aksiniya pulled up a tuft of grass and placed it softly on his eyes. Her hot voice, blotted out by joy, would say nothing.
The grass, you see ... is drying ... darling!
The curly-haired one wearily turned his face on one side, so that the grass fell to the ground.
—It's autumn, that's why it's drying.
Aksiniya sighed and raised her eyes, looking up the slope out of the gully. The grass was growing up afresh as if it were spring-time—there was enough for another haymaking. A birch tree, trembling, had caught on the sky.
—Let's go away together, Senka!
Where to?
—The people are greedy, I'm afraid! My soul is rotting... I can't put up with it, let's go away ... and you are good... The curly-haired one rose, straddling just as Pyotr straddled.
He slowly lowered his head and said quietly:
—If you're unhappy with your man, don't let it get you down. And if he beats you, you can leave him for ever, the law's easy now. Of course, we could go away, but where to? There's nowhere to go, that's it! And I've got a farm.
He rubbed his neck and spat.
—You ask your husband this: will he sell the logs he has lying around in his yard? You won't find anyone to build a house and you

know what workers are like nowadays yourself...

—I don't understand you, Sensha, are you joking? Build a house?

I'm going to build myself a house!

Her heart sank once more and her body felt drained as soon as she heard these words. A burning birch bark, her heart, throbbed once more inside her. A cry tore itself from her soul:

—But the Kirghizians? Sensha! You fed the Kirghizians, didn't you?

The curly-haired one chuckled.

—That was a joke with the Kirghizians, Aksiniya! I'll let them eat their fill, I thought, they've had enough of starving. I got loafs from my mother and pushed them into the heathens. Gobble them up! And sure enough, three of them snuffed it... They gorged themselves, eh? A neat trick, eh?—He glanced into her dark eye—like a deep gully—and it was all right, he didn't flinch.—Tomorrow I'll have guests, it's Sunday... You come here on Monday. All right? But what a neat trick to play on the heathen!

The curly-haired one left her.

Aksiniya dashed herself against the ground and began to wail. Thistles broke under her breast. The grass parted beneath her body and with a rustle like grass something sundered in her breast...

A green twilight found the gullies, sweeping

away the grass, the dull-smelling hawthorn and the lonely, sickly grass-gnawed road through the gullies, southward...

1922

THE HORSESHOE

I

Clouds, tacked by shell-fire—red, blood-red and heavy—broke off low over the town. An indistinct rumbling rolled over the wooden pavements; there was wet, grey autumn grass between the boards. People were seen through the narrow wooden chinks of the houses; they were whispering.

—They crossed the Suslovitsa...

—First they ... they'll hit the commune...

—They say that everyone is forgiven, only recognise the scale...

—What scale?

—Lord, where do we come in?

On this evening, when the yellow shells, smelling of coal and sulphur, were crippling the clouds and the sun swam in oily blood, like an unhealed wound, the district

blacksmith Vassily was boiling potatoes in his forge. He was blindish, not from the smith's trade but because of tailor's work: he had become a blacksmith because of his diseased eyes.

The smithy was at the foot of a hill, "at the edge". Lower down lay the town, while higher up, on top of the hill, was a cemetery. Why the cemetery and not the town was on the hill no-one knew. The living are having a good time anyway, while the dead have a better view from the hill—perhaps that was the idea behind it?

Yeroshka the apprentice—the blacksmith called all his apprentices Yeroshka—pumped the bellows. His voice was somehow strained, as if a pair of bellows were squeaking or dry leather was screeching. Chewing a half-cooked potato, he waved a hand as thin as a strap and asked:

—Will the cart trains bring white flour soon? They're doing a bunk...

—You aren't supposed to eat white flour—the Whites eat white flour, but we have to eat black flour.

Vassily bent a rusted tin hoop in his fingers, pulled it to pieces and tossed it into the corner. He walked round the forge, looked out, breathed in the sweetish dampness and hurriedly slammed the door.

—It's dark in the town, there isn't even a light in the prison. If you don't keep your

eye on your potatoes they'll boil over... The Whites'll probably come today, we should have gone home. Let them kill us here, it's nothing but a grave and at least it's our own, eh?.. They say that all working people are killed to the last man. They'll take us, Yeroshka, and hang us right here, from the cross-beams in the forge, where we shoe horses.

—Do they hang people by the heels? Those who have thin necks wouldn't stand it, uncle?

—Ask them—that's all you have to do.

—And shall we get to heaven after we die?

Vassily moved the cauldron off the fire and tested the potatoes with a brush. His grizzled, sparce beard became damp and began to smell of tobacco. He wanted to smoke and he scratched about in his pockets.

—Do you want to go to heaven, then?

—Yes.

—Give me some tobacco and I'll tell you the road.

Yeroshka released the strap of the bellows.

—I don't smoke, he said slowly.

He pondered and then softly coughed, grasping the strap:

—Our lads decided not to believe in God, you know, uncle.

—Oh yes!

—The Bolsheviks don't believe in God... They're boiling!

—Get them, then.

There was a loud explosion and a faint crackle among the crosses on the hill.
—A bomb, Yeroshka said fearfully.
—Eat your potatoes before they get cold.
But the blacksmith himself did not eat. He broke up his potato and sniffed: there was a smell of damp. He put it aside. He stood up and suddenly, hunching his shoulders, covered the coals in the forge with a clay pot. Yeroshka munched more slowly:
—It's dark, uncle.
Vassily stood by the doors. Somewhere far off a horse neighed; the wind passed tirelessly along the road. A wire whistled like a whip by the shoeing block, beside the smithy... The blacksmith felt cold and remembered that the collar of his shirt had no buttons. In the corner Yeroshka squeaked thinly:
—It's dark, uncle... Let's go into town ... there are rats here...
The shooting had probably ceased. The cracks of doors widened. The smell of coal grew heavier.
Then, coming from the shoeing block, a voice called hollow and slow:
—Blacksmith.

II

For some reason Yeroshka jerked the strap of the bellows; ashes rose up in the hearth.

Vassily was on the point of keeping silent, but he ran a heavy hand over the back of his neck and called hoarsely:
—Wha-at do you want?
—Blacksmith, the voice called, drawn out and thick.
At once coldness lashed him under his beard and on his sweaty chest as he stood in the wide-open door.
A horse was standing by the block, snorting and jingling its bridle. Above it there was a wide, dark voice.
—Do you have any horseshoes?
A strirrup jingled and the ground settled softly under the horseman's heel.
—Blacksmith?
Vassily rummaged in his pockets, spat and said, drawling in an effort to overcome the tremor in his voice:
—Have you anything to smoke?
—Give me a light. Then, probably unfastening his coat, he added more slowly:—Shoe the horse.
—Where are you from?
—Shoe it.
The man stood to one side. His breathing was slow.
It smelt thinly and unevenly, of sour bread.
"A peasant," Vassily thought joyfully and, after thumping the block with his fist, pronounced firmly:
– Yeroshka, blow up the coals.

Vassily approached the block.

We charge four times the normal rate for night work. My eyes run from night work, that's why I changed my trade. Anyway, who shoes at night? Horses have to sleep. What size is the hoof?

The other, as if dropping a heavy sack, repeated his words:

—Shoe it.

The fire in the forge burnt up and the reflection broke up in the blue puddle behind the door. Immense and warm, the hoof lay before Vassily like a dark dish. The hairs from the hoof ran long, harsh and greyish, smelling of rotten straw. Yeroshka brought some horseshoes, his heel knocking at a box. Then Vassily began to select a horseshoe, sorting through the iron and thickly ingraining his palm with acrid rust. One after the other the horseshoes lay on the lumpy palm, in bunches and separately, old, worn and gleaming, some quite rough, others new and still smelling of the fire, before falling, 'jingling' back into the box. They weren't right! Six pairs, lying in the corner, had survived from the old train horses which had drawn the squire's loads long ago, before the war. Yeroshka pulled them out, whistled and tossed coals into the furnace to make the forge lighter. These weren't right either! They lay like rings on his palm.

The man, who had climbed off his horse,

jingled something behind the block. Vassily turned and looked at him.

A rifle gleamed like a fine thread on an immense piece of soldier's broadcloth. A pointed cap with large ear-flaps and a five-pointed star was pulled down low on the broad brow.

Vassily asked hurriedly:

—What *guberniya* are you from?

—Me? Murom.

Vassily hurried about the smithy; he stumbled against an upturned hoof and tossed it into the corner. For some reason he threw coals into the furnace, waving a piece of iron over the coals, and shouted:

—There aren't any horseshoes that will do! There aren't any!

The heavy rings of a bit jingled.

—Make them fit!

The man, who had climbed off his horse, walked off into the darkness with an immense, ponderous stride, from whence his voice rang out:

—Shoe it.

While he heated the iron to redness Vassily was about to sigh and complain as the sparks flew, but he whistled and scraped with a hammer.

—Ah-ee! Ah-ee! Yeeroshka!

Yeroshka, too, twisted his thin body, pumping the bellows powerfully while the sparks rose and the hammer swung, forcing

air into the forge, sweating and piping:
—Ah-ee, uncle! Ah-ee...
And only then, when the horseshoe lay like a dark-red rye bun, did Vassily cry:
—Straight on to them, eh?
—Straight on! Strike!
—I'm striking! Ah-ee! Stra-aight on?
—Straight on.
—Ah-ee!
The horse breathed warmly, right on Vassily's neck. The man in the pointed cap still did not show his face.
A string of carts splashed up the hill, cutting through the mud.
Vassily wanted to complain, to tell properly and at length what he, the shoeing smith Vassily, wanted. The horse tossed up smacking, reeking mud with its shod hooves, as if with spades.
The saddle under Vassily's hand was warm and caressing.
Pointing to the hill, he said:
—The town should be moved here.
Again the man's words fell from out of the gloom like heavy layers of earth, for the last time now:
—We'll move it. Wait.

1922

THE DEBT

I

The map of the *uezd* lay light and small in the hand, like an autumn leaf. When the detachment galloped through groves the leaves scattered and stuck to the wet reins. The swollen straps of the reins were like the splashes of mud that tore away from the wheels of machine-gun carriages.

As he stuffed the map into his brief-case Fadeytsev expressed a number of ideas to adjutant Karnaukhov in a voice that was the product of war and propagandizing: 1) that to divide the detachment on the eve or on the day of a clash was a disgrace to the revolution; 2) that the muddle they were in could not be blamed on the rain and the darkness; 3) that it was time to post sentries and send out scouts.

"And generally show more initiative."

But his voice gave out. He was tired.

"The doctor is asking for eleven blankets, comrade commissar—the sick are complaining... Those who are well sleep under blankets, they say, but we sleep under greatcoats. And it's autumn."

"I've got the office-staff and the sick on my hands—did you explain that to them? Hm... There's no transport."

"I also explained that to them in the fullest detail and that the detachment is divided into two halves. It's dark here and there's the office-staff. Am I supposed to organise a mass meeting for them because of eleven blankets? I told them—Chugreyev will come and smash us and order earth blankets for everyone."

"You told the sick that? Comrade, you are rash."

"If they were ordinary sick, yes—these are revolutionaries."

Adjutant Karnaukhov loved a good phrase. He was a Perm peasant by birth, short-armed with a bare, hairy chest. When he rode out of a town he donned a woolen sailor's jacket and a tall fur hat.

A Red Army man brought in Fadeytsev's kit-bag. At the door, while he cleaned the mud from the strings fastening it with a splinter of wood, he told the adjutant with a chuckle:

"An old woman came to the gates and

asked us not to use the church as a latrine. Take my barn, she says, it's clean, too, and even though it smells a bit of grain, she says, all the same. There's black ignorance for you! She's heard an earful about us..."

"Slaves," Karnaukhov said in a bass voice. "When we smash the bandits we'll come back and organise talks on religion. You pass that on."

"You mean organise talks with old women? All they're good for is paving over swamps, old people."

Fadeytsev was vaguely taking in the conversation.

"Tea would be nice—the samovar should be lit," he said softly.

The owner of the hut, Bakushev, a dark-mouthed bony old man, brought in charcoal in a sieve, waving the disproportionately long sleeves of his shirt. The adjutant and the Red Army man began a fierce quarrel. Fadeytsev looked sleepily through the window, but saw little. In the field empty stalks were ringing like glass... The sky was sulphur yellow... The wet reins smelled of sedge and mare's-tails. The bare impoverished ears of wheat parched the spirit. During the day there was a hungry ringing heat in the clouds; at night savage winds tore through the fields. And although a bullet could tear one's heart in pieces from behind every tussock, it was still easier to ride through the marshes than over the empty

field boundaries; it was nicer to break open a tin of food under a wet currant bush. Perhaps that was why Commissar Fadeytsev was sleepy. But it was impossible to close his encrusted lids ("in the name of the revolution," Karnaukhov would have said pompously). The detachment had dashed, tirelessly it seemed, for six days over fields, log trails and swamps to capture the nest of the bandits and gallows' bird Chugreyev in the reeds.

"...the interests of communism unwaveringly! "

Adjudant Karnaukhov suddenly shouted at the top of his voice.

The old man immediately brought in a samovar.

Fadeytsev slowly stretched out on a bench.

"I'll have a nap all the same, boys, while the samovar boils... The boys will arrive on time, the transport..."

He pulled at his boot tops. The old man hurried to help. Karnaukhov swore.

"Why are you taking off his boots?—you want to go back to tsarism?"

"But he's tired, the commander."

"If he's tired he can sleep perfectly well in his boots. What do you think of this subject, comrade?"

'Better if I slept..."

The old man pushed a pillow under his arm. The adjutant "had a talk":

"Do you receive pamphlets? You must

keep right up to date with events, dad."

"The bandits have come, my friend, just like a swarm of locusts. The people in our *volost* are all peaceful, but now they'll come galloping ... there was one big fellow—a mug like a coachman's, he should be ashamed—who wanted liver. And what do you think? He shot the neighbour's cow, cut out the liver, roasted it and threw the rest away. And the people, the people has been knocked from pillar to po-ost...

Karnaukhov coughed sternly:

"The next task will be the root and branch destruction of banditry and after that peaceful construction..."

...After a long ride Fadeytsev's dreams always began like this, as if everything inside was overgrown with warm fur.

But suddenly the floorboards cracked and broke... Brazen ringing hooves split the enormous white stove.

Fadeytsev, understanding nothing, leaped up, crazed and half-asleep. He struck his forehead on the edge of the table. It was night. The paraffin lamp had apparently gone out.

In the window-frame a bullet hissed and whistled. Three times, after shots from a Mauser, someone called loudly: "Comrade Fadeytsev! " The hiss of the bullet was like a call cut off in the middle. The clopping of horses' hooves became softer, as if they were galloping over turf. Pressing his revolver to

his side, Fadeytsev jumped towards the door. The old man crossed himself hurriedly in the direction of the window. His face was whiter than his beard, his fingers black, the nails cinnabar; the nails were larger than his eyes. Fadeytsev looked outside. In the light of a large lantern a fellow with a floppy forelock (the mane of his horse was covered with a big piece of green canvas) was wearily waving a sabre. The groans after each stroke were tired, too. "He's slashed him," the old man said.

Fadeytsev looked at the old man, clinging to the stove, and repeated:

"He's killed him? Him? The bandits? Who has he killed?"

"They have. The bandits."

And now Fadeytsev remembered that, once again, his revolver was not loaded. After five years of revolution he still could not learn to load at the proper time. The revolver scratched over the floorboards. A kitten darted from under the bench. And suddenly it became frightening to run into the doorway. There was not even a bolt on the doors. The old man turned round. In a business-like way and with an oath he thrust the revolver into the ashes inside the stove.

"That's it..." Fadeytsev reflected rapidly and he felt a moment's pity for Karnaukhov. "They've killed him..."

'Go into the yard ... they'll kill us

anyway—you should show me some pity before I die. Say that I didn't let you in of my own free will ... say that. Our Lady, Holy Mother of God! Go on, be off with you! Comm-oonists..." The old man drew out the word. "Go away, commissar."

There was a penetrating whistle from the crossroads. Fadeytsev's legs seemed to turn to stone. He fell to his knees. He crawled two or three yards in this way and for some reason half-opened the trap-door into the cellar. A rotten smell of sprouting potatoes enveloped him.

"They'll fi-ind you... I'll bash you over the head with a pestle! Do you want to hide?"

Fadeytsev suddenly drew strength from this malicious toothless voice. He seized the kit-bag with his possessions. After the kit-bag came his briefcase; for some reason he cut his cap into two pieces. The knife trembling in his fingers reminded him of scissors.

"Give me some scissors," he shouted. "Hurry! and a shirt ... your shirt ... or I'll kill you! "

The old man's jaw dropped:

"Bu-ut..."

The old man gave him a worn-down pair of scissors and a smoothly ironed shirt. As he cut off his beard, which had grown in a wedge shape, Fadeytsev said hurriedly:

"An old one ... I need an old one ... be quick about it! You shall say ... what is

your name?"

"Mine?"

"Well? Yours."

The old man seemed to have forgotten to be afraid. He looked round the hut in a proprietorial way.

"What's it to you?"

"Tell me!"

"Well, it's Bakushev, Lexey Osipych ... well?"

He raised his fists (the scissors and the remains of his beard in his fingers) and, swallowing the saliva, hissed furiously into the old man's hair. Ah, everything was swathed in this hair, as if in thick felt: eyes, heart, lips that had never kissed children. Words finer and more penetrating than a hair were needed...

"You say, say that I am your ... son! Semyon... Semyon Alexeich ... a deserter from the Red Army! Without papers ... yes... Otherwise it will be the end for you! Our men will come and if they find me finished off they'll salt your guts for the next fifty years ... they'll shoot, they'll slash you ... it'll be the end, damn you! If you betray me..."

He waved the scissors at the old man. As if combing his dirty hair, the old man kept crossing himself in repulsive fashion.

"We ... we are peasants ... our business ... all right, I shall tell the old woman... I'll look. All right, all right."

The bench under Fadeytsev's body seemed to be smeared with oil. No, it was his palms that had sweated so greasily. Karnaukhov had left a cigarette-case on the table. Fadeytsev thrust it into the chimney of the samovar ("it's leather, it will stink", he thought, but he did not have the strength to retrieve it). Gazing dully at the samovar, he collected the spittle in his gullet—and could not spit.

With a gun he could have made his way to a horse of some kind. Wind, evening, cold autumn mud.

Ah, he should learn to load his revolver in good time!

II

For a moment it seemed that he himself was walking, then the steps were in the wall and on the ceiling. Ravings.

The old woman ran in. In the passage the tramp of several feet was heard. "Go to the stove," Fadeytsev whispered breathlessly. The door immediately vanished from sight, for the stove was like an unending brick wall.

The door was abruptly thrown open and a frozen gutteral voice said quickly:

"Light! Light the lamp and come out of there! "

A Cossack with a flesh-coloured forelock placed a large lantern on the floor. The candle

in it was made of wax, yellow, a church candle. Jerking his thin shoulders, a tall man stepped forward.

"Hey, you, any Reds here?"

He raised his hands wearily: the barrels of the revolvers were like fingers spattered with mud.

"Where are they?"

"They bunked it away, my dear, as soon as they ran for the horses it was as if they had been swallowed up ... perhaps they're elsewhere, not in my hut, my dear... They wanted to take my son with them, we could hardly talk them out of it ... we're this and that, we said..."

"Your son? This?"

An impatient question came from the passage:

"Shall we take him away, your excellency? If you're to judge from his mug..."

"Did I tell you to interfere? Well?"

Although no-one stirred, he thrust his elbow back in self-defence. Again, with a slight jerk of his shoulder, he stepped towards Fadeytsev. Each of his words was even and white, like his teeth. Drops of dirt, looking like blood in the lamp light, trembled in his meagre, long moustaches. He thrust the revolver back into the passage and his cold, rectangular hand felt Fadeytsev's fingers. As he questioned Fadeytsev his hands constantly rose higher to the chest and the sides. His

nails seemed to bite through the clothes. He felt Fadeytsev's underwear. Fadeytsev loved shag tobacco and kept it, not in a pouch, but actually in his pocket. The tall soldier took out a pinch, sniffed it and spat.

"Your regiment?"

"The Third Putilov Steelworks..."

"Your name?"

"Bakushev, Semyon."

"Volunteer?"

"No, sir, I was conscripted."

"Are you on leave?"

"No, sir..."

"Wounded? A deserter? Your papers? None? So you are lying. You will be shot."

In the passage the latch was raised. Someone, thumping the stock of his rifle, leaped from the porch into the mud. In the henhouse the birds scurried about in sleepy fright—the. Cossack had killed some for supper. Lazily surveying the walls, the tall man gently impelled Fadeytsev towards the door. Several pairs of coarse boots lined up: the passage was like a tomb. You wouldn't get straighter than a rifle. He drew himself up. The tall one had a revolver: he held it behind his back. His moustaches hung over Fadeytsev's shoulder like dry pine needles. Try and grab his revolver!

In order to move closer to the window Fadeytsev asked:

"May I say goodbye to my parents?"

Fadeytsev fell at the feet of the old people.

The old woman began to wail. The old man was about to bend down to bless him, but suddenly he crawled, lamenting, to the boots of the tall one.

"My lord, I knew your dad and your mam ... yes ... why take my son? He came three days ago ... The animal's sick, well, we thought our city son would cure it ... and now our son's going to his grave...

"My golden boy, Senyushka, my clear-eyed falcon! "

The tall man looked sullenly at the floor. The satiny tallow of the candle dripped on his sheepskin and the old man hurriedly licked it off. "Ah, all in vain," Fadeytsev thought, but this evidently met with the tall man's approval. He bent down.

"Get up! The devil take you, I forgive him—one deserter more or less won't change anything! Only look out, old man—if you're lying to me, you'll be sorry. I've got a long memory for bad deeds..."

He moved unhurriedly towards the door, but after glancing briefly at Fadeytsev's profile, fixed his gaze on him with unexpected speed. Jerking his shoulder spasmodically, he looked into his eyes: to Fadeytsev it seemed that the man's eyelids touched his cheek. He pressed one hand to his chest and screamed:

"Eh? What? Your name? Take off your cap! "

Fadeytsev remembered that, when the words "you will be shot" had been said, he had put on a cap. It was too small, someone else's, grubby...

"Semyon Bakushev."

The tall man pushed Fadeytsev's hair aside and looked with astonishment at the deep scar by the temple.

"Bakushev? You're lying! "

Clumsily, as if moving it through water, he shook his head.

"I see ... yes... I don't remember Bakushev. Have you ever been in Oryol?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know the Princes Chugreyev?"

"You..." Fadeytsev reflected with a kind of melancholy joy. When he had sent him to the district the chairman of the *guberniya* executive committee had given him for identification purposes a photograph of General Chugreyev, the leader of the Greens. He was younger and plumper in the photograph and his eyebrows were slightly curved. This photograph was in his suitcase, in the cellar. Fadeytsev remembered how peasants made sweeping gestures. He stuck out his chest and raised his elbows high.

"The Chugreyevs! God! Why, the whole of our *volost*..."

"You're lying ... that's all lies, you swine."

A soldier in scarlet epaulettes stuck a candle on the table.

"Go to the devil! "

General Prince Chugreyev, whom Commissar Fadeytsev had come dashing to the Kalichin marshes to capture, sat before him, plucking rapidly at the dirty skin on his chin. There was a mixture of foppishness and squalor about both the general himself and his subordinates. He unbuttoned his sheepskin: his green uniform was trimmed with gold (although it was somewhat tarnished), but his breeches were of coarse soldier's khakhi. Mud ran from his high, chrome-leather boots.

"Which regiment did you serve in during the German war?"

Fadeytsev named a regiment.

"I don't remember it. What was your rank?"

"Private."

"Mm..."

After prolonged stamping a voice asked wearily from the passage:

"Are your orders to take him out?"

"Wait. Man, bring some milk! "

He drank long and hurriedly, pouring milk over his beard. Shots crackled outside. Chugreyev pushed the jug aside. Bluish flies (there are sticky aspen buds like them to be seen on spring evenings) settled on the edge.

He lowered his hands ponderously on to the table.

"I have seen you somewhere, without doubt, and in something important ... so important ... for me..."

He felt his chest.

"You see, even my heart has begun to hurt. With me it always..."

The old man again fell heavily to his knees. He looked tenderly at Fadeytsev.

"So this is your son, you say?"

"But of course, my lord, that's God's truth..."

"It's harder to stand on your knees than your heels—get up! I shall interrogate him at headquarters and release him. Pray to God that he may speak the truth... Come! "

III

General Chugreyev was slightly grey and walked with a swinging and somewhat jerky step. Commissar Fadeytsev was short and round-shouldered and since he had spent his entire life in underground activities, his steps were small, as if he were afraid of treading on someone's toes. The night was damp and windy, dark-blue—it tore the straw from the roof, feebly bending it. The men had no strength to remove the mushroom-smelling straws from their chins and shoulders. The Cossacks lagged behind, only two of them holding their rifles in a horizontal position. Chugreyev's headquarters were in a village school. As he climbed the steps Chugreyev asked:

"Frightened?"

"You only die once," Fadeytsev answered in a ringing, public-meeting voice. Walking had refreshed and put heart in him and before being shot he had decided to shout: "Long live the revolution! "

"We killed seventy-two people today. If you work it out, where do you come in the count, eh? Frightened?"

Fadeytsev was silent.

The desks had been moved against the walls and a paraffin lamp stood (in a purple-blue patch) on the floor. However, the room smelt of chalk, not paraffin. Underfoot, like lime in water, pieces of chalk squeaked. A bald man with ears like overripe cucumbers, his clothes spotted with white, was sleeping by the blackboard.

"The paymaster. Asleep. We captured some spirits from the Bolsheviks and got drunk. Why do they carry spirits with them, eh?"

"Us? Spirits? Swine! " adjutant Karnaukhov would have shouted. Fadeytsev again felt a flash of sorrow for Karnaukhov. He remained silent.

Not allowing him to speak, Chugreyev screwed up his face and pointed to something above his cheek.

"I'm sick of all this, sit down. Frightened?"

The table staggered and squeaked.

Chugreyev staggered, too; his shoulders shook and he pressed his shivering knees. He

asked about the German war and about the officers who had served in different regiments.

Suddenly he leaped up:

"Gagarin? Who was he, a Penza man?"

"Don't know, sir."

Chugreyev brought his sleepy eyes the colour of wet sand close to Fadeytsev.

"I haven't slept for four nights... You should address me by my title. Have you forgotten about that among the Bolsheviks?" He quickly ran a finger over Fadeytsev's chin. "You shaved off your beard today," he said slowly and asked Fadeytsev to name the towns through which he had passed.

"Tula... Voronezh..."

Chugreyev stopped him.

"What year were you in Voronezh?"

"In 1917."

"Which month?"

"January, general."

Chugreyev tittered, his hands twitching over his knees as if brushing off dust. His giggle was clumsy, comic, like tearing paper.

"I remember! I..."

Brushing his hand against the desks, he shook a pencil and a book out of a bag... He tore a sheet from a correspondence book. The *Artillery Regulations* was dusty and fly-blown. He thrust the regulations at Fadeytsev.

"Copy them! Be quick about it."

Fadeytsev began to write, deliberately bending his finger and dragging his palm after

each letter. The letters had to be formed unevenly, peasant-fashion, like twigs. The letters jumped. His heart was heavy and jumpy. The tall man glanced over his shoulder at the paper and gave a dry laugh, as if tearing out the sheet. He banged the butt of his revolver on the table, hurrying Fadeytsev. The pencils crumbled. The regulations were endless. Fadeytsev began to lose track of how the letters should be formed. He distorted them, deliberately rounding them, thinking that the letter he had just written was straighter than those that had preceded it. The o's were particularly bad, some elongated, like a grimace, some round, like rings and some stretched and bent, like pods. It was an anguish!

Unexpectedly, Chugreyev threw back his chair, stamped and shouted:

"Write your name! Your own! "

And Fadeytsev began to write "Fa...", but he quickly crossed it out and wrote: "Alexey Bakushev".

Chugreyev ripped out the piece of paper and smoothed it out.

"Superb. Fa... Fariseyev, for example, or Faraonchikov... Which?"

"I was frightened, your ... from fright... It's not my day..."

"We know what frightened you, my dear. Tell me about Voronezh. You went out in the town, drank at the club..."

He paced the room restlessly.

"In the club! In the club! In January in Voronezh there's a... Got it, by God. What's your name, Fa-a..."

"Bakushev, your excellency."

"Oh? Wait, don't interrupt ... now I remember. You recognise me... In the club, January, 1917, and I—I am Prince Chugreyev, eh?"

Fadeytsev relaxed his cheeks and straightened his lips—he smiled.

"Your excellency is so gracious as to joke..."

The paymaster brought some moonshine. Chugreyev sat crossing and uncrossing his legs and pushing back the hair, which smelled of horses, and said:

"Look! I know many good officers from the finest families who serve with the Bolsheviks... Some were mobilised, others are there from weakness of will... In the end, to attain the degree of hatred I feel you would have to be persecuted, harried and baited for four years, to be spat at in the eyes and the mouth before the whole world! So-o... I look out of the window now and I think—after all it is possible: a peasant or a Cossack will gallop into the town or to the partisan detachments that are trying to catch me now—and betray me! Betray me just like that! You, too, would go over to them out of weakness of character, wouldn't you, eh?

Eh? Tomorrow morning I shall give all the peasants a beating and find out about you ... that's nonsense, incidentally! You understand, of course, that I get less out of the peasants than from anyone else—they're afraid of me, but they believe in the Bolsheviks! If it was two years ago... I repeat, I can't recall your name—the circumstances of our meeting, however, are clear to me..."

He fumbled quickly in his pockets and confusedly twisted his moustaches.

"My memory has become bad since an incident with the Cheka. I've been looking for my note-book for eighteen months... To sum up! On the tenth or the ninth of January, 1917. Do you remember that evening?"

"Not a thing..."

"Oh, stop playing the fool... On that evening I lost to you... I..."

He pressed his fingers against his eyelids and asked in a dull voice, inclining his long, bony face towards Fadeytsev:

"You understand, you understand... I... I... forget how much I lost to you. How much did I lose?"

He squeezed his hands together.

"There's not a soul around me who would remember—or jog my memory! Who you are, what your name is... Yes. On the ninth of January in the Voronezh officers' club I lost to you after giving you my word of

honour ... the next day I was to obtain the money, I didn't have it. But the day after that you disappeared... So, once in my entire life, I, Prince Chugreyev, did not pay a card debt. Now a lucky chance has brought us together."

Fadeytsev looked at his mouth, which had become pale. In 1917, in January, (he remembered with pain that he had been in love then) he, a private soldier, had actually been to a play. Soldiers were allowed only in the gallery—she had sat in the stalls with her mother... He had looked angrily at the columns, which were painted to resemble malachite; he dimly recalled a tall figure in a gold-braided uniform... His anger was still preserved from that time! But cards ... he had never held a pack of cards in his hand.

He pushed the glass away.

"I don't drink, your excellency, I don't drink or smoke."

Restless sparks flashed in Chugreyev's eyes. The wind hissed tirelessly in the other side of the wall. The paymaster, who had unusually black moustaches, as if carved from a lump of coal, opened a suitcase filled to the top with money with a practised, bored movement. As he looked at him, Fadeytsev thought: "There's honesty, you louse. You probably slaughtered two hundred or so people for that money. Swine!" He became a little calmer and even pretended to sip from his glass.

Twisting his moustaches over his cup, Chugreyev went on hoarsely:

"Why, I know your regiment: the 6th Duke's Dragoons ... and now you are in the Putilov regiment! We have a lot to be ashamed of ... captain ... enough for centuries to come! You think that I despise you, but I give you my word that I don't! I once hid from the Bolsheviks and a peasant I knew helped me hide, a good peasant I thought... Of co-ourse, he knew that I was a prince, his father was a serf who had worked in my grandfather's garden (my grandfather, may his memory be blessed, loved to grow lettuce in his garden)... and all the same he ... made me empty his sick wife's chamber-pot! When, later, I came to him with my detachment I gazed and gazed at his mug—and I didn't spit in it, I forgave him... You have to understand people, captain."

Chugreyev sprawled on his back on a desk and half-closed his eyes. The skin under his eyes was flabby and bluish-white, as if the eyes were slipping down his face...

A raw, familiar ache crept from Fadeytsev's boots towards his heart. It was the same heart-ache he had had when the bandits came into the passage.

"Let me go," he whispered. "I'm tired."

Chugreyev wrinkled up his face.

"You pursued us well and truly, captain, I've not slept for three days or more. I wanted

to seize your headquarters and we launched a rapid strike. But the headquaters was on the other side of the village. Some new commissar or other has been sent after me from the *guberniya*, there wasn't time to tell me his name ... you don't know it?"

"The Reds were saying it was Shchukin."

"Yes, 'Comrade' Shchukin ... but even he won't catch me. Do you know who will scoop me up?"

He blinked slightly, as if in a strong light.

"Someone whose surname has an even number of letters."

Fadeytsev calculated—his had eight letters.

"God grant they don't catch you," he said hoarsely.

"They'll send a commissar like that—with four letters or eight—and finis! "

"Finis?" Fadeytsev queried, looking at his face. "Finis for whom?"

The other, opening his decayed mouth wide, chuckled.

"Without signs it's boring to believe, captain! Take note, take note! There are many remarkable things that are worth taking note of in the world. Listen, give me your hand..."

Chugreyev rose and shudderingly squeezed Fadeytsev's fingers with his sticky, rectangular hand. In a hollow voice he said:

"Captain, I swear to you on the word of honour of the princes Chugreyev that I

shall release you unharmed beyond the line of my sentries and that I shall repay my debt—now, right now! Vaska, open the suitcases, put the money on the table ... clear away the cucumbers! And the gold, from the sack there, bring the gold... No-one, no-one in my whole life—a card debt! Captain, what is your name and how much do I owe you?"

Fadeytsev looked at the thick wads of notes, the gold coins, the rings. Chugreyev scattered glittering stones into a plate of cucumbers from a suede-leather pouch.

"Is that enough?" he asked boastfully.

Fadeytsev pressed his elbow painfully against the table.

"Whether I tell the truth or lie, the peasants will find out in the morning..." Suddenly he remembered the detachment: if only he could find out where they had hidden and where they were going. What did he need some idiotic debt for? No doubt more than one person caught in this way had perished. "Hold firm in the name of revolutionary motives," he recalled the adjutant saying.

Deliberately, he sighed deeply as he drew back.

"Don't burden your soul with a sin ... let me go, your honour ... your excellency... I am Bakushev, you can ask the whole village if you like."

"Bakushev, eh? We'll find out here and now. Right wheel! Quick march... One, two! Halt! "

He took him by the arm and led him to the table.

"Is that the way soldiers march? Only a dragoon could throw up the right leg like that. Sit down. Do you smoke? Here you are. And don't conceal your hands... Vaska, moonshine and a cucumber! A pity—up until now I slaughtered every communist in the heat of the moment, otherwise they could have told me something about you. Well, tell me..."

"Your excellency, I swear to God! "

Chugreyev's foot slammed onto the floor.

"Abominable, captain. I could get it out of you with a revolver at your temple. You may have forgotten the code of the nobility, but do you retain a scrap of human conscience? Captain! "

When depressed, some sort of pleasure is to be found in repeating the same words. Word then becomes as dull and worn as the heart.

But Fadeytsev remained silent.

"Can you talk straight to me?"

" 'No, in the name of the revolution' "—that was how Karnaukhov, the cheerful and direct adjutant, would have replied.

Fadeytsev, however, remained silent.

Chugreyev walked away from the table

uncomprehendingly.

"Write the figure with a pencil and go. If you are a communist, then this is the people's money, sir, money I have robbed. You have a right to take it and donate it to orphanages or rest homes for prostitutes, the devil take you! "

His face was grim and hard.

"What is it that's valuable in me and what does he want to buy with this money?" Anxiety and anger settled in Fadeytsev's breast.

Prince Chugreyev was drinking moonshine from a cup. What madness! The prince talked long and sensibly about his estate of eight thousand *desyatinas* in Simbirsk *guberniya.*

Cockerels, beating their wings and clearing their throats, dropped warm feathers. The earth again dropped one joyful and bitter feather—the day... The day passed—it was midnight.

The prince reproached him again:

"You won't let me sleep for a fifth night. I envy your stubbornness. Grant me the opportunity to sleep."

Fadeytsev's eyes were black and empty. Chugreyev turned away.

The prince, no doubt, had the feeling that he would never be able to sleep.

Tired, but with hope, he said:

"Go... I shall remember how many thousands the debt was tomorrow..."

Fadeytsev turned. No, they always shot

people in the back. Better to let them strike at the chest. He backed towards the door.

A revolver and money lay on the table before the prince. What did he intend to do? His only action at that moment was to spit drunkenly.

Was not the entire night a drunken expectoration? It was already midnight.

The broad streets breathed of grass—it was dewy and smelled slightly of spirit. A patrol was returning to the village. A calf bellowed joyfully, thinly, squealing like a village woman.

The sky was light and pale.

The earth was light and pink.

Old man Bakushev, holding up his ticking trousers, opened the gates for him. He patted him affectionately on the shoulder (his hand smelt of pure wheat flour).

"Would you like some milk?" he asked quietly and affectionately. "I've been going through it here..."

Fadeytsev, grinning dully, climbed on to the sleeping shelf and closed his eyes. He wanted to understand, to recollect. The pillow smelled of someone's strong body, his lips seemed covered with honey...

IV

Whooping. Dawn.

A machine-gun. Sun on the machine-gun.

The empty streets filled with the tramp of feet.

Fadeytsev jumped down from the sleeping-shelf.

"Our boys! They must be ours."

"Mm..." The old man drew out the sound doubtfully. "Come to help Chugreyev."

But half an hour later Red Army men were tossing Fadeytsev in a greatcoat, singing the *Internationale* and writing out a joyful resolution.

Adjutant Karnaukhov stood on the porch, smiling at everyone with his broad body. His yellowish-olive riding-breeches were covered with blood and his neck was tightly bandaged.

"I thought you had been killed," Fadeytsev repeated to him.

"And I thought that you had had it! When they fired, I lost my wits and stopped thinking, dashed out into the yard, saw that your horse had gone—well, I thought, you'd run for it. There was no-one here to mount a defence with, so I rushed to join up with the detachment... In both sections there they said that they hadn't encountered you, you were nowhere... Well, we attacked, thinking that at least we'd get your body back."

"And the prince?"

"That dunderhead? He's bolted—he left the money, but Mironov cut down his paymaster. After all, they finished off all our wounded."

He went to the hut.

"We'll get them, comrade. We'll get them now."

Fadeytsev met the old man at the door with a samovar.

"Tea, dad?"

"Tea, son."

"I won't refuse... Tea would be good now."

Fadeytsev looked out the window as he walked round the table (his kit-bag lay in the front corner of the room). Orderlies were carrying a wounded man, a peasant with a cart was hauling three horses' carcasses out of the village and below, at the foot of the hill, an ordinary birch wood, a gully and a tiny lake could be seen, where young geese were trying to fly. The sun was the colour of polished copper and the geese had bright blood-red under-wings...

... And then Fadeytsev remembered...

Two years before Fadeytsev had been an assistant to the commandant of the Cheka in the *guberniya*. He had been ordered to escort a group of White-guard officers sentenced to be shot. It was early morning, just as now, the colour of polished copper. The condemned men (there were five of them) talked about hunting while a truck took them out of town, churning up the resounding, strong-smelling mud. One, a tall man with thin, ash-grey moustaches, told curious stories about his remarkable dog Fingal. "Even killing people like that's a pleasure," one of

the agents said in Fadeytsev's ear. But Fadeytsev was going to his first execution and his heart was heavy, although he firmly believed that they had to be destroyed. The truck stopped by a small lake, just like this one. Frightened geese flew clumsily away from the vehicle. The condemned men were led to a ravine and the tall man asked Fadeytsev for a cigarette before he died. Fadeytsev was taken aback and refused. The tall man knitted his angular brows and said dryly: "Consistent". After the execution had been carried out Fadeytsev listened to the pulses and hearts of the officers (for some reason he had been ashamed to call a doctor); four had died instantly, but the fifth—the tall man—looked at him with clouded eyes the colour of wet sand, biting his lip. According to instructions, Fadeytsev was supposed to give him the coup de grace. The soldiers were tossing the corpses into the gully, scattering a little sand over them (for everyone knew that in three or four hours relatives would come to the gully and carry away the bodies; at first this had been resisted, but then opposition had become wearisome). The tall man had been shot through the shoulder.

Without dropping his eyes from him, Fadeytsev took out his revolver, put it against the man's chest and pressed the trigger. The revolver misfired. He looked in the chamber—it was empty. As always, he had forgotten to

load the revolver. Now he should ask a soldier to fire, but he felt ashamed of his negligence and said: "He's dead ... throw him in..."

Fadeytsev felt his revolver and moved away from the window.

"Id-diot..." he breathed. "Id-diot ... o-oh ... what an idiot."

"Who is?"

"Who? How should I know? I'd better take a nap, Comrade Karnaukhov! "

And before he fell asleep he checked his revolver again; it was full, like a pod with grain before the harvest.

1923

THE ENCOUNTER

My spring thaw!
With a joy that thaws rapidly, like snow on the steppes, I watch the sleepy birds soaring slowly over the ravines and the grass; even their shadows are heavy, as if cast from iron.
In the desert my friends' horses have left the corpses of their masters—and yet there is no loneliness in my heart. A narrow path leads me to the ruins of Karakorum where once lived Ghenghiz Khan who ordered that beasts from all Central Asia be driven to the Zeravshan valley for a great hunt. Even today, when irrigation ditches are dug for the swampy rice paddies, Tadzhiks find hundreds of deer skulls and boars' tusks of unseen dimensions.
My friends who are still among the living dismount, make a miserable camp-fire from

dried manure and boil thick Mongolian tea, but I, accompanied by Dokay Salet Amir, dash on. The path becomes narrower and narrower—now it is just a goat-track.

My horse scores its chest as it clears a way for my stirrups. Behind me Dokay sings a song he has made up about a Russian in comical glasses who told him on the road about the great hunt of Ghenghiz Khan, justly called Iron Foot and Iron Heart.

We are on a hill and there in the valley before us are the rocks of Karakorum. Its black shadow once lay over all Central Asia, but now the stones of its houses are without the clear outlines of their own that once gave grounds for a comparison between them and a cavalry saddle-cloth. The stones are wrapped around with miserable Mongolian grass.

My horse looks, replete, at the grass.

Once upon a time yellow-cheekboned and with slits of narrow eyes, like a wound in the heart, a Mongol with the signet-ring of Ghenghiz Khan bounded from the gates to the right—across the Irtysh and the Ob to the ocean, to the left across the Volga to the Polish forests and further, for patterned carpets,—to Persia.

Now there are the shadows of silence.

The yellowish-blue dewy evening creeps up towards my stirrups and an enormous dog seems to be licking the instep of my boot.

—Baramys. Let's go? Dokay asks. Onward?
—Baramys, I agree. Onward.
But our horses continue to stand immobile. Their ears are pricked up and to me it seems that the beating of my horse's heart is gently rocking my stirrup. I lean towards the pommel of my saddle and gaze into the bushes.
Perhaps a wolf is hurrying towards its lair or a dzhulbars, a tiger, has come from the Balkhash. There is a soft silence over the bushes, as if all around were wrapped in wool, and the sky is low like the rolled-up fleece of a dzhabag, a sheep. The horse raises its hoof soundlessly and trembles again and suddenly a sharp whistle, like rent silk, trembles over the path.
The flame of a tarred splinter blazes wide on one of the rocks. For a moment the enormous rock takes on the configurations of a house.
—Who is it? we shout. Who is there? Who moves?
I feel that my saddle is as tautly poised as a rifle bolt. Thoughts of flight during the last few weeks have taught me to remember my saddle first and my gun afterwards.
The whistle is repeated. I would say that it is filled with a kind of grey hoarseness. Suddenly I remember: that is how a shepherd calls his scattered flock deep in the night. He knows already that the flock will not return and it is not a call, but rather a whistle of despair. Only the annoyed dogs rub at his

legs. The warm earth, flattened by bodies, is empty and the wind silently carries away tufts of wool—the remnants of his flock.
I do not speak. The horse snorts.
The burning splinter trembles on the rock. Its orange flame thickens.
At last it goes out. I shout again:
—Who-o is it?
—Wait, apa... Dokay whispers to me. Tokhta... Wait.
We wait.
The bushes suddenly begin to hiss.
No, those are steps. They are heavy and I remember the iron foot of the builder of Karakorum. They are slow. The person walking breathes as if he were breathing with iron lungs.
My horse backs away when a wide grey figure, almost crawling over the ground, appears from the bushes.
—Who are you? he asks me hoarsely. Are you a kyzyl-urus?
—Yes, I answer, raising my gun, yes, a kyzyl-urus (which means Red Russian in the language of the desert).
—Then I shall speak and kiss your stirrup, rasps the man from the bushes.
—Speak.
Again a splinter blazes up and together with the tar I clearly catch the smell of a corpse. And I hurry the man and the horse, shaking its bridle, hurries him too.

—Speak, you who has approached by night.
—I am speaking to you, who sit on a chestnut horse, and my words are as true as that once, here, instead of Karakorum wormwood, there were blacksmiths who could forge sabres better than the blacksmiths of the white tsar who you, kara-urus, slaughtered. So it had to be, therefore, and I do not pity him. I am a blacksmith and I have a forge in the settlement and it may be that my line comes from the blacksmiths of Karakorum.
I have a herd of five horned cattle, two horses and the number of rams tradition indicates for a poor man. I paid bride-price for my wife for eight years and I would have paid for another eighty if necessary for the sake of one sunrise on the carpet of my yurt behind the reed partition. Her walk was lighter than all the pacers of the Gobi and her gingers, milking a mare, shook the udder more gently that the wind shakes the feather-grass and so my heart shook when she gave me a cup filled to the brim with ayran, the soured milk. I am a man who takes pride in his home, but when I took the cup I splashed ayran on the carpet. If you had looked at the splashed drops you would have licked them up with your tongue, for you Russians are not used to loving. Your love is like a young horse, which does not know how to behave itself in a race. I did not want to be a bey, a rich man; my wife did not want to be a princess, but all the same

yesterday evening beys and urus-Cossacks with brocaded shoulders came to the Ai Toy valley. They slaughtered my herd and I think, kyzyl-urus, that they probably hadn't had enough blood and after trampling on my wife they cut out her breasts on the bare ground. They did not find her heart, because it dried up with suffering for my herds and me that evening and was probably no bigger than a grain of dust! I could not bring you my slaughtered sheep and cows—they were eaten. I have brought my wife to show you... I have carried her twenty versts from the Ai Toy valley to the walls of Karakorum to exchange her body for a faithful gun...

The Kirghizian pulled away the dirty blanket covering the corpse. A black drop of pitch ran down and hissed reedily on the dull-raspberry-coloured pieces of flesh. The woman's mouth was ripped open and her cheek had been pierced by sabres.

—She was called Kyzymil, the Kirghizian said, sweeping off the piece of charcoal that had fallen on his wife's wound with his finger-nail.—She spat in the senior man's beard when he pushed his hand into her blouse after drinking too much kumyss.

He suddenly fell on his knees and seized my stirrup. His lips thrust my boot out of the stirrup.

—Give me a rifle, urus. I carried Kyzymil twenty versts on my back, she is heavy, I

loved her well and fed her well. I told you about her bride-price..."

I think that the sleeping birds were dreaming of the day. One rose now from the bushes, its wings heavily bedewed. The dew had soaked my horse's rein. "Why is my horse going more slowly than my thoughts?" I asked myself.

The path is carrying me to the camp-fires of my friends. The camp-fires seem to be covered with dew. The path is wet with dew, like my horse's rein.

The horses neigh mournfully by the camp-fires. I hear the excited voices of my friends—now we shall saddle the horses and fly further into the sands. Our pursuers are close.

I gave Kyzymil's husband my rifle.

He and Dokay stayed to bury Kyzymil under one of the rocks of Karakorum. Later they would return to our camp-fires and the headquarters secretary would ask the unknown grave-digger his name and surname.

We would ride past the Karakorum path on into the sandy desert and the infrequent morning birds would meet us far away among the dunes. Then the sun would stand at midday, we would be sick at heart and the brown sand would kiss our tracks off.

The spring time is my thawing, time to light the fires of wisdom! .. For the horses of the desert are drawing close to the great roads!

1925

WHEN I WAS A FAKIR

I left Doctor Voskresensky spiritually weary. I felt as if I had grown grey in a single morning. I had thought that if the doctor would give me a prescription I could, when I had sold my only pair of trousers, buy cocaine at a chemist's. To sell my trousers for food and be well-fed but trouserless would be stupid.

My landlady, who was shortsighted and had a runny nose, stooped low to spell out a handbill on the table:

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THIS TOWN
GALA PRESENTATION
Appearance of the world-famous fakir and dervish
BEN ALI BEY!

—Where did you learn to do that, then? she asked, twitching her extravagantly runny nose.

—In India, I replied glumly.

Indeed, what else could I say? I could hardly tell her that, instead of three rubles, I had agreed to take two "Hamburg" swords from a junk-dealer for my folding bed. The swords were completely identical except that, if you looked closely, one of the swords was whole while the other was collapsible and had three buttons on the handle. The buttons were white, made of ivory, perhaps, and that irritated me more than anything. If one button was pressed a third of the blade withdrew. Press the second button—and the next third disappeared. In the end all three parts were concealed in the handle.

—What a lot of money you will make with these! the junk-dealer told me affectionately.

I was wretched with longing for affection and hope. And so I replied, more to myself:

—But surely one sword isn't enough?

At this the junk-dealer added a tattered book, published, as I now recall, by Kholmushin in Moscow: *A Guide to Black and White Magic with an Appendix on Card Tricks.*

—In this you will find your future life in detail now, young man.

And, in fact, the old man had almost guessed rightly: a part of my life really did have its

beginnings there.
My landlady suffered with her stomach and in the entire apartment at night only a small paraffin lamp in the lavatory burned. There was, of course, neither lamp nor paraffin in my cubby-hole. That night my landlady knocked in vain at the lavatory door. From within she heard a stern voice repeat over and over: "Excuse me, but I seem to have dysentery". That was me, studying black magic.
In the morning I went to the House of the People, where a troupe of actors numbering five was presenting *The Red Lamp, Eugene Onegin* and *Woe from Wit.* When I told Pudozhgorsky (he was the director) that could swallow swords, he gave me a crooked smile.
—Swords, what are swords? Everyone knows that they're German work. Now, if you could only hypnotize the masses. Or take an eye from its socket and return it to its former place, say. *That* would sell tickets!
—I haven't got as far as eyes, I replied bravely, but I can pierce my hands, chest and cheeks painlessly with ladies' steel hat pins and hang weights of up to three pounds from them.
—Why didn't you say so before?
—I haven't any hat pins.
—We'll get some. From our actresses. How can you have gone as far as hat pins when you can't do eyes? he asked, not without respect, and sighed. —Actually, it's all a matter of study and time.

And that was why my landlady was reading the enormous handbill. According to this handbill I was obliged, as an old and cunning Hindu, "to swallow swords and burning tow, jump through knives and *pierce* my body *painlessly* with ladies' hat pins, suspending from them weights of up to three pounds". The handbill should also have stated that I took red-hot iron in my bare hands, but I could not master this experiment. Kholmushin's *Black Magic* had let me down. It was written there that the hands should be rubbed with egg yolk, smeared with glue and sprinkled "with one part of coarsely ground licorice" and this I had followed to the letter. Then I slightly heated a pair of samovar tongs and applied them to my palm. There was a smell of burning flesh in the room and my landlady came running in response to my yell. I soaked the hand in sour milk. Pressing her stomach with her bony hands, my landlady looked with sympathy at me and at the spoiled sour milk. I regretted the sour milk, too. I was hungry and thought scornfully that only my outward and sudden sufferings had made my landlady sacrifice the sour milk for me.

Once in three days I was fed at a monastery, which stood above the green Tobol. There were green bells in the monastery and well-fed grey pigeons, at the sight of which the

cats and I licked our lips. By the way, I wanted to eat everything I saw at that time or else exchange it for something edible. The monk who poured meatless cabbage soup into my wooden bowl asked:
—Have you got a splinter in your hand, then? And he added with affection:
—You're not a carpenter, are you?
—It's Italian gangrene, I replied, my throat parched.
The monk's eyes expressed emotion. Filled with pity and surprise, he gave me an extra slice of bread.
—They say that there are no wooden houses at all in Italy? he said scornfully and with curiosity.
—Absolutely right, I confirmed. Just stone and volcanic lava.
—So there are no carpenters there, either? he asked with slight trepidation.
—What is your name? I asked.
—I am called Yevsey as a monk.
—Are you a carpenter, then?
The monk was delighted and gave me yet another slice. He picked up the skirts of his cassock from the greasy bench.
—What are you saying, why... I'm from Perm, I am, Perm... All our holy men there built the cloisters! After all, Christ was also a carpenter.
Yevsey stooped, skipped me more bread and asked softly:

—You read books—that's why you wear glasses. Now, isn't it written there somewhere that Christ worked with a plane or was handy with an axe?

I did not reply and after dinner Yevsey called me aside to the monastery gates, where the blind men howled and the fat pigeons strutted restlessly.

"Well, my lad," I thought, "don't you even believe in God?"

My hunger appeased and my spirits high, my secret status as a fakir had straightened out my life, India was often in my thoughts and I was composing an introductory lecture to my experiments. Nevertheless, I did not want to offend the hospitable Yevsey, who had evidently retired into a monastery only because Christ, too, was a carpenter.

—Have you ever been to the theatre, father? To a show, I mean?

—The occasion hasn't arisen.

—I'll give you a ticket, Yevsey!

—And what will you be doing, then?

—Swallowing fire and stabbing my body without pain...

Yevsey recoiled. His greyish, tattered cassock immediately became lighter than his freckled face. His little beard stood out so sharply as if it had been planed. His hands were thin, but all the same he could not raise them to cross himself.

—Sa-tan, he whispered, why are you tempting

me, you faithless Satan!
Then he straightened himself, brought his hands quickly forward and said tonelessly:
—I don't see why you need me, but I shall unmask you. Or do you want to rob me of God? I shan't betray God. You are cunning, Satan!
He stretched out his thin hand and I put a theatre pass into it and left. Scarcely had my enormous billboards appeared on fences than ancient crones presented themselves at Pudozhgorsky's room to see me—the wizard, miracle-worker and fortune-teller. An official from the district treasury who was five hundred rubles short in his book-keeping wanted to know whether the money would be returned. Pudozhgorsky took a ruble from him and said that he would receive a written answer the following day. Young ladies came for love potions. A curious merchant wanted to know what Indian vodka tasted like, how much a bottle cost and whether he would have time to order it for his name-day celebrations. My heart beat as rapidly as my fame. And in the box-office, tickets sold as rapidly as my heart thumped.
Did the lads who caught crabs in the Tobol with nets stretched over iron hoops realise that the glum person sitting on the bank above them and mindlessly leafing through *Magic* was that same renowned fakir whose lightning fame had set the quiet town by its ears?

It is hard to surprise people now. As a rule, we have ceased to be naive. The last time I saw surprise in public was when black bread began to be sold freely and also, later, when an elephant was brought from Bukhara to Moscow. But even that surprise was of the "What, elephants, is it?" kind. "In a year there'll be a hundred elephants born here from it. The only surprising thing is, what we should do with them?"

Those were other days—worse, but more fun. Now I am proud and haughty and I, too, have learned not to be surprised. I am not even moved by the memory of how I spread brown make-up over my face, wound a green ribbon smelling of bedbugs round my head and covered my legs with red calico trousers stuffed into Caucasian boots. Pudozhgorsky, stammering and winking an eye that resembled the letter "z", boasted of the takings. Beside the make-up, the enormous hat pins, polished with chalk, gleamed revoltingly on a tidily-arranged plate. The weights "from one to three pounds" lay there, too, adorned with loops of faded ribbon carrying the remnants of heliotrope scent. There were also the German swords, a torch, petrol and a hoop of knives, through which I had to jump.

On stage the band of the voluntary fire-brigade was drinking vodka, pressing down baked eggs and testing whether their instru-

ments were tuned with their fingers. Their instruments were brass and I thought that the bandsmen, like me, realised that nothing would come of our performance. The next day the entire town would point its finger at me and little boys would yell in their hoarse autumn voices: "Fakir-r, nuts to yer-r! " The little boys found it amusing that autumn leaves stuck to their tattered trousers, but I had long since become fed up with this milk-and-water autumn lyricism: I wanted a bowl of good rich soup with dumplings, "twenty for seven kopecks", cigarettes and a story roughed-edged and mocking.

The flutist, who was quite drunk and quite wise, came into my dressing-room and picked up a heavy bell, which he rang three times. He swore at Pudozhgorsky, who was trying to sell another dozen extra tickets.

The curtain, gnawed by mice and full of holes from the fingers of amateur performers keeping an eye on the takings and on their young lady-friends, rose with all the jerky nervousness of an amateur. Pudozhgorsky wore a dress coat with a paper flower. Half of the flower fell off, at which the audience grinned without malice, watching with curiosity Pudozhgorsky stamp on that bloom throughout the reading; it also emerged that, instead of dress pumps, Pudozhgorsky was wearing new rubber galoshes. I do not remember what Pudozhgorsky read, what was

then sung or how hot and stuffy it was in the hall. I did not funk. I clearly recall that I passionately wished not to stumble against the wings. Why I was afraid of stumbling I do not know. Perhaps the rumble of shifting scenery still remained in my ears.

—Are you ready?

On the occasion of so grand a performance Pudozhgorsky addressed even the ticket-sellers in the formal mode. And he rolled his "r's" when he did so, too.

I laid aside the sword with its hateful ivory buttons, remembered that my bed squeaked in a way that recalled a cricket and replied:

—Cricket.

Pudozhgorsky thinking that this was what was called for, shook my had firmly and said with conviction:

—Cricket, indeed.

My introduction (I remember it word for word) began as follows:

—Ladies and gentlemen! Before beginning my experiments, I should tell you when and where fakirs appeared in the world. In far-off times there lived a militant people—the Hindus. They had a custom to subject a young man to various tests and torments before he was accepted as a soldier. For example, a bag filled with live ants was placed on his head and he was led around the village to the singing of girls...

I went on to say that there was no magic or

mystery in my experiments and that personal hypnotism and strength of will handed down to us from the Hindus alone played any role in them.

—Music, ma-estro! Pudozhgorsky cried, rolling his "r's" furiously.

I displayed the sword without the white buttons to the rows of spectators, returned to my table, began to wipe my hands with a towel and covered the sword with it. Then I took the other sword, with the buttons, and, of course, had no trouble in holding the handle in my mouth, the blades having withdrawn neatly into the haft. I pressed the buttons in reverse and the blades came out again. I also leaped through a wooden hoop with knives at the sides, the blades set away from me, so that if I brushed against one of the knives it, being feebly fixed, would simply fall right out the hoop. But leaping is not difficult—one needs only to be determined and to accustom one's body to repeating the same actions in precise sequence. Later, I leaped through this hoop with as little concern as I put on my glasses. Swallowing fire ... however, it is difficult now to obtain a book on magic and the State Publishing House does not involve itself in such profitable matters, I have no wish to talk about this.

I was tired and sweat stood out on my neck. I feared sweat more than anything. The muscles slipped under your fingers then and

you felt like a fish. I straightened up and began to count the people sitting in the front row. I reached eighteen. How many men and how many women? I tried to match them up, my spirits rose and the sweating subsided.

I had been on the stage only once before. There had been a circus in Pavlodar and I had wrestled as an amateur. My opponent had had me on my back in five seconds, slapped me on the rear and said: "This ring is for big boys, snot-nose. Learn to stand on your own feet first."

I had no love for the stage now, either. The drunken musicians roared "In the Hills of Manchuria" and I was filled with hatred and revulsion for those thundering trumpets. The hall stank of boiled meat and unfulfilled human desires. Enormous heels thundered on the wooden floors and to me it may have seemed that the first pin I had to drive into my chest was being driven home by these thundering heels.

I do not remember whether I thought that—probably not. I clearly remember that a razor-edged pain which set my saliva flowing struck my eyelids, the head of the pin leaped in my hands and I almost shuddered, but then I glanced at those eighteen ugly mugs in the front row, looking at me dully, gloatingly and with belief in my will-power—and stuck the pin still more deeply into my body. "If only I don't pierce an artery," I repeated over and

over, "if only I don't pierce an artery..." Now a small pink tongue began to slide from my flesh and through my skin and crawled further, gleaming lazy and pinkish.
A part of my chest the size of a match-box had been pierced through. I even felt a kind of pride and quickly seized another pin. My cheeks burned and my mouth was parched, but I had to hurry. Pudozhgorsky looked at me from the wings with incomprehension and I realised that I had forgotten to smile. I smiled shamefacedly. The rows of people clapped and for a moment I thought that they were applauding my smile... No, it was the third pin already in my chest. I took a one-pound weight to hang on the pin. It was then that a grey, eternal pain struck me in the nape of the neck and melted down my spinal cord. I thought that my chest had been torn open and blood was gushing out. I did not feel the weight pulling on the pin at all—a huge nail seemed to be entering my ribs. I realised that the pain would make me sweat. That could not be allowed: it might cause blood poisoning. I began to count the people in the front row. I could not see them and as I seized the plate I quickly clenched my teeth and forgot about my smile—that fixed circus smile which dim-witted idiots so deplore, not understanding that a smile is a triumph over oneself and the only reward for the body, for when you smile you really do feel warmer.

So, outraging my own body, I began without a smile to drive pins into my body with brazen stubbornness and pride and to hang weights on them.

—Enough, enou-gh! the rows of people shouted.

One fair-haired lady fainted, but no-one took care to carry her out.

Then I straightened. I smiled, as far as my skewered cheeks allowed, and descended the steps into the auditorium.

I passed five rows and in the sixth, on the right, I saw Yevsey's rough-hewn beard. The little beard was covered with sweat. His eyes with their swollen lids were averted from me and he flapped his hands.

Amid the roar of applause I could not hear what he shouted to me. I felt sick and my entire mouth seemed to be filled with blood.

For some reason I removed the lightest weights first and pulled out the pins stuck through the muscles of my arms. In my dressing-room I hurriedly spat into a towel. But it had been an illusion and there was no blood in my mouth.

—Does it hurt? Pudozhgorsky asked, counting the takings.

—Not much.

—It's a matter of getting used to it. The same goes for me... Just look at the scoundrels, they've slipped us a forged three-piece. My wife tells me that having children is terribly painful, too.

He shot a glance over my head.
Later, after Pudozhgorsky had paid me for my performance, Doctor Voskresensky came into my dressing-room: he had a bald, omniscient face, was a member of the universal knowledge society and took a great interest in Saturn.
—Well, you must forgive me, of course, he said, but I had the idea that you were a drug-addict and so refused you a prescription for cocaine. When I was looking at your suffering face I cursed myself: cocaine soothes pain, but you were doing your act without cocaine.
—I didn't feel my pain at all, I said, drinking my third glass of water.
—You see pain everywhere you look. But it's a matter of self-hypnosis. I needed the cocaine to disinfect steel. Incidentally, I got it even without you...
—In our town you can get anything, the doctor replied with conviction.
—Have I ever told you about Saturn? How without a telescope we...
—I've no time, I said, imperceptibly rubbing iodine on to my chest under my wrap, but tell me anyway.
The omniscient doctor sat down beside me and told me about Saturn for an hour and a half. Pudozhgorsky wrote a handbill for the next performance: "Many new feats by the world-famous fakir and dervish..."
I should have asked the doctor for a

prescription for cocaine, but I hated his omniscient countenance, his celluloid collar and the long nail on his little finger; I knew that I would say nothing and that the steel pins, their sting undrawn by cocaine, would again stick into my body...

And I dreamed with him of how good it would be to visit the Pulkovo observatory.

At last Doctor Voskresensky became convinced of how much more intelligent he was than I. Talking with me began to bore him.

The wooden rails of the porch, furry and smelling of damp, shook for the last time as the self-confident doctor brought his hands down heavily on them. A leaf smelling of wine and wind stick to my temple.

But I knew that Yevsey was waiting for me at the gates. I could make out the mud-spattered skirts of his cassock under a feeble street-lamp. He had already had time to change—probably he felt more cheerful in monastic garb.

—I understand you, Yevsey stated, seizing me with a hot hand.—I understand you through and through, like an axe through wood. I shall treat your wounds, perhaps I can get some wood-oil. If you believed in God, you would be at least an apostle. I have looked into your eyes—they're not satanic eyes... I looked and I thought: ours is a tedious, dusty life. And, you know, I became

sad... I shall bring healing oil for your wounds... I did not take Yevsey's oil, but he left his soul in my hands. He began as a carpenter, building a show-booth for our company at the Slavgorod fair; he went to Kulunda as a clown and in the Rok-Saya valley he was a trick horseman and matchmaker. The hilarious story of his wedding, which took place on the Semirechensky highway, I shall describe some other time.

1925

THE DESERT OF TUUB KOYA

CHAPTER ONE

That tough grass! Stones, let alone horses, would have been unable to crush or chew up grass like that. Is it not because of that why the crags in the mountains are crumbled and gnawed, like the teeth of horses that crumble against the grasses of Tuub Koya.

And above everything, right down to the glaciers, is the sky, as yellow as the sands of Tuub Koya.

The stars in it are like the glow of dried dung in the fire.

But is that really so at all? For no one knows if there are stars or not in this dull yellow, paltry copper-coin sky the colour of rotten straw.

All the same, the propagandist, projectionist and general windbag Yevdokim Petrovich

Glushkov made his way to Comrade Omekhin's partisan detachment over the Urals and other steppes through the tough grass and sand from somewhere by Tyumen.

Even more surprising than his words, which, it is true, were worth fifty newspapers, was the alabaster, girlish hue of his face. No desert sun anywhere could disturb his tender skin, while he, without being in any way overcome, was proud of his words and, in particular, of the way he carried out propaganda.

He brought his equipment with him on three mules. The first—Commander by name—carried a machine-gun, entered in the inventory as being "in complete working order". The other animals carried a cinema projector and round canisters of film in a brightly-coloured Turkmenian bag.

Glushkov's feet were bare and cracked. For some reason he did not roll up his trousers and there was thick yellow dust in the turn-ups, as if he had deliberately poured sand into them. Drawing himself up, he stood erect before Comrade Omekhin and his face was as pink as if he had just come from the glaciers.

—The remarkable way whereby I influence the masses consists in elucidating the events of the preceding order, showing the above-mentioned events and dramas of the heart on a small screen by means of domestic electricity and utilising a machine, activated by the

human hand, called "Kok", which means in Russian "victory".
—Victory? Omekhin asked and looked at the mountains of Tuub Koya, at the glaciers, that cut across the sky alone and towards which, leaving no trace, the White-guard detachments had gone.
—Victory, without question, Glushkov answered and his teeth showed whiter than his alabaster face.
—All right, then, Omekhin said. We are not against bourgeois culture if it is sensible... Show it then.
Omekhin's detachment had roamed the sand-dunes of Mongolia for more than a year, the horses had chewed the steadfast grass of the desert for more than a dozen months and there was much that Omekhin had forgotten. And so, after taking a few steps, he stopped and looked at those three emaciated mules, at the fat gadflies darting about them and at Glushkov, who was unpacking the "Kok" apparatus on a felt rug.
—They're about love, then?
—For the most part, comrade.
—A pity. We need films about death here.
—We shall supply them with an appropriate framework.
The glaciers alone, winking their hatred of the stifling heat, cut across the sky.
And as he walked away to his tent Omekhin said hoarsely:

—Well, then if we supply the framework...

CHAPTER TWO

In the middle of the reel, when the suave and polished drone had declared his love to a lady with a long train and his rival, a decaying, bald villain, was eavesdropping behind the portiere, and when Glushkov had off by heart one of his amazing speeches, a dozen of which would make the old world curl up and blow away, reinforcements in the shape of Tartars from Ufa reached the detachment in a rush, having made their way there over unknown paths.

The screen went blank, the partisans shouted "hurrah" and Lumaksha, a Cossack from Semirechiye, ran a curved knife across the throat of a foal. The cauldrons kept for guests were such that they might have been intended for boiling medicine and, in accordance with the custom of the steppes, Omekhin himself placed the first piece of cooked meat with his fingers in the mouth of the commander of the detachment, a Tartar called Maxim Semyonych Paleyka.

I am now under your direct command, Paleyka said, quickly swallowing the piece of meat.

—Eat your fill, Omekhin answered, pushing the plate towards him. As for the film, I

note that from the point of view of human expediency love arouses pity towards oneself.
—Why? Life doesn't prevent you from loving and especially from having children. What a life without having children. I think that I should have only one woman. To put it figuratively or, for example, in an allegory, you should fix yourself to her neck for the whole of your life and drink.
—I don't approve, Omekhin objected.
He wanted to ask about Paleyka's bourgeois origins, but at this moment the thin note of the bugle was heard, seeming to evaporate in the dry, flame-like air.
Horsemen sprang on to their mounts.
Lumaksha the Cossack, who had slaughtered the foal, led in two Kirghizians. Trying to hold themselves straight in their saddles, in the Russian manner, they said that *ak-rus*—white people—had left the glaciers by a round-about route for Omekhin's detachment, seizing Kirghizian herds on the way, and the beys—the elders—intended to slaughter the *dzhataks*.
—We are *dzhataks* ourselves, they said. Let us come, we came of our own free will.
"*Dzhatak* means poor man," Glushkov translated to himself. "As soon as I finish showing the film, I must note that and use it in my speech."
The days there were dry, like the wind. The boredom of local life is drier and simpler than

the wind and the wind sweeps the way out of it with yellow, coarse sand. One morning another three partisans went to collect kizyak* and did not return.

In the Kayga valley sentries guarding the reserve herds of horses, empty tents, three mules gazing by the saksaul bushes and the propagandist Glushkov, sleeping on a rock from boredom by full reels of film, were left.

The sentries told tales of priests' servants and the priests' wives. An insatiable longing for women's bodies dripped from their lips and Glushkov was wakened by the question:

—Surely there's no such woman alive as in the pictures? You have to take it that every woman like that has been killed and if they haven't, we'll finish them. What are you wagging your tail for, you bitch, when we're suffering here, eh?

Glushkov woke up. He felt cramped and hot in his dirty clothes and ran his fingers over his hot and sweaty stomach. "Indeed," he thought, "surely one could not show thighs like that in the desert." And he added with a curse, which was unusual for him.

—"I'll cut the above-mentioned piece right out of the reel." At the same time...

On a dark path a horse's hooves shied away.

The dark cherry colour of a resinous chip of wood lit up Omekhin's knotty chin, the blood

*Dried dung used for fuel. *Tr.*

on the horse's hooves and the man's chest, slashed open in the form of a star. A horse's leg had sunk hoof-deep in the man's chest. He was one of the three who had gone out in the morning to gather kizyak.

Coarse sand brings an end to life here.

Paleyka adjusted the straps of his revolver and said quietly to Omekhin:

—I propose that the corpse be moved aside. No prisoners to be taken.

From mane to mane, from sheepskin hat to sheepskin hat the words carried in an indistinct noise, as if a cartridge were being slid into a clip:

—No prisoners to be taken.

—Yes, whispered the rear man in the detachment, glancing round at the stifling darkness,—that's right: no prisoners to be taken.

As you know, in the battle by Tachi village Colonel Kanashvili was killed, seventy-three followers of the ataman were slaughtered and Kanashvili's brother was taken prisoner.

The mountain stream did not take prisoners, either. The water becomes cloudy with blood only in songs, and the swirls of mist in the mountains were just as they had been the previous day.

—Shoot him, Paleyka said without looking at the prisoner. He searched, vainly, for matches, but in fact he had not smoked all night—and, of course, it is pleasanter to hold a cigarette in

one's hand than a sabre.
—Comrade...
Omekhin lit a match for him. Such courtesy surprised Paleyka and he even bowed:
—I thank you, Comrade Omekhin.
Omekhin lit another match and said, holding a tiny, burning splinter in his hand:
—But comrade, since she is a woman, not his brother...
Paleyka again fumbled for matches.
—I propose that we shoot her in half an hour's time. I shall interrogate her myself... So she is his wife, not his brother? he asked Omekhin for some reason.
The latter shook his head and Paleyka also inclined his head.
—A wife, too ... can be shot.
—She can, Omekhin confirmed. And Paleyka immediately felt that his cigarette was drawing.
It was dawn. Friday. The Tartars skilfully slaughtered the foals and the glaciers of Tuub Koya gleamed just as boldly, just as confidently, as if by their gleam they were themselves creating their happiness.

CHAPTER THREE

—She has been interrogated. Why keep a guard on her—her cob-house is so dilapidated it will collapse, the roof will crush her and

you won't have time to put a bullet in her. Builders?—a clay pot would be stronger.

Paleyka loved to talk about the great war. He would tell the story of how, during the capture of Lvov, a black-haired Magyar girl had fallen in love with him because of his bravery and how he had wanted to marry her. The wedding had not taken place: the troops had left Lvov, but as a keepsake she had given him a dozen silk handkerchiefs of a ballad-like blue colour.

Then he would take out one of the handkerchiefs and, if he felt the need, placed his nose into it, like a gem.

Which was just what happened now—he extended his finger for his handkerchief, his riding breeches taking up the entire rock.

—Have you interrogated her, Maxim Semyonych?

Paleyka raised his handkerchief. Five Tartars, lazily shifting from one foot to another, stood waiting behind Omekhin.

—Yes, I have, as far as that goes. However, I should warn you, Alexey Petrovich, that the Georgian woman you have indicated is not Kanashvili's wife but his sister. Her name is Yelena and she is, incidentally, unmarried. She agreed to supply exhaustive information on the position of the bandit gangs in the mountains and to point out to us their roundabout routes and all the bandits' links with the town's people.

Omekhin realised from the way Paleyka firmly pronounced the last sentence that he was lying. A tormenting heat passed from his lips to his ears and down on to his neck and it seemed to him that he was backing away.

—I consent to a postponement of the execution. I shall interrogate her myself, Comrade Paleyka.

—I am very pleased. You, as one with a sound knowledge of the political leadership, who have studied the steppe over a long time. Do you have any contacts with the town, if she is dispatched there?

A means of contact here is a red flag and that full of holes from the winds and the rain.

An eccentric, Paleyka, you with your spring-like, blue soul!

Omekhin approached the ancient Kirghizian cob-house, which had a ground and crushed appearance. Several partisans were looking through the round holes bored in the rear wall of the house, jumping the queue, quarrelling among themselves and violently pulling at each other's sleeves.

—The devil take it, you've ripped the sleeve right out! You can sew it on now.

—And you stuck your head in like a bedbug in someone's bosom. Look, you've gone all red, the blood's run to your face. Others want to look, too.

Haggard and pale, like his old, worn greatcoat, a peasant vainly tried to thrust himself

between two muscular Tartars. The sides of his greatcoat hung over his waist, which was tightly drawn in by his belt, completely covering the broad strap, curled over at both edges, and he supported himself with his elbows on the Tartars standing beside him.

—Just one glance, brothers, with one eye, the puny fellow implored. Come on, let me...

Another man was thin and fidgety; in a short greatcoat, which he had contrived to give the appearance of a foppish kaftan, bare-footed, he slipped eel-like between the smooth, round backs and searched out an opening right under a man's elbow. The bony feet of the man in the kaftan rested quite imperceptibly on the heavy boots of the Tartars. Squealing with pleasure, he said:

—Oh, what a woman... All she does is powder and paint...

The men crowding round chuckled:

—Surely she doesn't still powder herself?! What a bitch, it's only been three days. Another woman would still be wet with weeping, one of our Russian women if she was in her place, but this one doesn't give a damn.

—She's a Pole...

—Maybe a Jew, too, only she's fair.

—And her husband's a general, so they say. They didn't catch him.

—Ha, what did she need a husband for? He wasn't even in the detachment and she

bossed the show. There's a devil for you, wears trousers, carries a knife, but paints her mug.

A fresh crowd of those wanting to have a look at the prisoner was pushing towards the holes bored in the wall, grabbing each other's elbows. The old, bullet-riddled greatcoat of one split and the skirt hung to the ground. Without looking round, its owner struck the offender with his fist on the head. His cap was pushed over his eyes and in a blind fury he began to thump those pressing against him wherever they presented a target. The grey greatcoats merged into a single cursing, swaying, tattered heap.

Omekhin, who had long been observing the soldiers with dissatisfaction, advanced on them, holding a heavy Nagan pistol.

—Hold it, you aren't flies! What are you crawling on the ground for? Where is the guard? Go on, disperse, I tell you.

The men started back, as if unsticking themselves from one another, and Omekhin was overcome by a wave of acrid sweat.

—Powders her face all over, somebody at the back sighed in a reedy voice.

Omekhin walked round the partisans, looking for a hole in the wall at the level of his head. None was sufficiently high. He glanced round.

—What are you looking at?

—Get down lower, brother, lower.

Discontentedly, Omekhin crammed his cap

down on his head a little and looked in, bending almost double. At first he saw nothing: the narrow glazed windows right under the ceiling gave little light. The cob-house was completely empty. It had a smell of ash. There were two dirty strips of pine which formed a plank-bed or, rather, a long, narrow bench and on it, now immediately visible, sat a woman in a white Circassian coat. Two tight plaits lay in a straight line on her back. The plaits seemed green in colour. Her face could not be seen: it was turned towards the light from the window. On her knees was a white fur hat. A round mirror was completely lost in the soft, combed lambskin. Beside her, on a board, was a round, flat, blue box. In the woman's hands was a powder-puff. She was moving it in front of her face, turning her head before the mirror. Her face was turning more and more away from Omekhin. He was evidently leaning with all his weight, for the ancient clay wall uttered a dry crackle. The woman quickly tucked her feet in their black lacquered boots under the board and looked round. The smell of wet ash became even stronger. Her grey eyes scanned the wall with hatred. Her brows completely overhung her eyes, or else the lashes were long enough to reach her brows.

—Sss ... swine, she hissed rather than said.

Her face was pale, seared, dead, inward somehow, not outward. Her eyes were those

of a horsewoman, quick.
Omekhin turned away from the crack and shuddered, as if this darting, scurrying, insect had slid over his chest.
Paleyka's hand was laid on his shoulder, in a friendly way, but firmly. His fingers were torn and dirty, like well-steamed birch twigs from the bathhouse.
—Have you interrogated her?
—I intend to, Omekhin replied.
—Maybe she should be sent away under guard with a covering letter? The men in the section are undesirably excited. Have you noticed that, Alexey Petrovich?
Narrowing his large mouth, Omekhin asked quickly:
—Comrade Paleyka, you seem to be more concerned about her than... Yes, she has a cosy place here, her box of powder won't let her go far away. Mm... There's no reason to chat with her, she must be interrogated. I shall interrogate her, Omekhin repeated.
Their voices were soft, going no further than their compressed lips and panting breath, but the prisoner had a sharp ear. She pressed her entire body against the wall of the cob-house. Her body was so hot, so seized by flame. The rough grey wall accepted and absorbed her heat—it was altogether warm. Very warm. It would not have been at all surprising if the warmth she transmitted had touched and reached the faces of the men

standing nearby. The cheeks of one flushed and his ears burned.

—I am not with you, although as the leader of a military section I should be the first to learn all information communicated by her.

Paleyka suddenly turned sharply, military-style, saluted silently and walked away beside the tents.

Omekhin shouted after him:

—Wait, Maxim! We must clear this up. Would you believe...

He mumbled the last words when already running, flinging wide the long skirts of his greatcoat with his knees.

—We shall have to talk in the forest, Paleyka said to him over his shoulder.

—In the forest?

—Yes. It's awkward here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Omekhin flung his greatcoat down on a saksaul. A blue, exotic bird darted out from under the bush.

"A nice place for a grave," he thought.

Paleyka was walking far ahead, swinging his arms wide in an unsoldierly way.

...Now he will take it into his head to go not as far as the saksauls but as far as the mountains. Not the mountains, but as far as the Kaga rocks and that's five versts at least.

A dog's march—that's what five versts is called. The campfires smoked in the valley. The partisans' horses tore at grass that was like twigs. The mountains were like tents in which death sleeps.
Only the glaciers rent the yellow sky.
The glaciers laughed with their cold at the desert.
...Is he going towards the moutains, then?
...You won't reach them, brother, in such anguish.

...We do not all get there. There was another summer in Petersburg, where there are no mountains and the sea lies behind level cliffs that were built by man. All the same, the wind of the desert blows there, too, twisting the skirts of our coats and drying lips that are already dry. A bird back home at Lebyazhye brought its yellow chicks out of the rushes to the pure water. I did not see them. Books reminded me of this. The paths of Petersburg are level and straight, but nevertheless I did not go far with my anguish...

Paleyka, his strength gone, collapsed face down on the ground. The saksaul stabbed with sharp needles into the thin cloth, slashing the body pressed against the ground. Must be warm rain, the bushes thought discontentedly.

Panting, Omekhin stopped beside him. His lips were hard, like the wood of the saksaul, as if Omekhin had eaten dry crusts all his life. "I see that you really are done for, Maxim, eh?" he was on the point of saying and, as he always did when speaking, he rubbed his right foot against the ground and bent it.

—It happens, he murmured.

And it became so quiet that a bluish mouse suddenly jumped from a nearby bush, four inches away from the trunk. It was called a *yukhtach*, which means "greedy". Its nose, slightly hooked, was reflective and haughty.

Paleyka raised himself slightly on his elbows and soundlessly drew out his Nagan. His mouth opened: one tooth was longer than the others. Most importantly, it was yellower than the others.

He turned his sweaty head towards Omekhin and said:

—Shoot!

Omekhin wanted to step back, but Paleyka had raised the sights to the level of his eyes and Omekhin whispered:

—The devil with you, Maxim Semyonych, why should I shoot you?

—Not me, the mouse. The one who hits it gets her. Shoot, for heaven's sake.

—You're off your head! I've never shot mice with a revolver.

—Shoot! I shall count to two. The one who kills it gets her. Our guns are of different

systems. Shoot, I tell you.
The mouse was on the alert, its tail raised. It sighed and was ready to run ... and suddenly, independently of himself, Omekhin whispered:
—Start counting!

CHAPTER FIVE

The woman lay on the bench, the fur hat placed under her head. When Paleyka burst into the cob-house and hastily shut the door behind him, she quickly rose and sat down, gripping the edge of the plank with both hands.
—I shall cry out. What do you want?
Without replying, Paleyka scraped a match and lit a small candle-end, looking around to see where he could place it. She narrowed her eyes, as if about to look into the distance, quickly bent his hand at the elbow and said:
—Stay like that!
Carefully she took a small round mirror from the pocket of her blouse and a powder-box from the side pocket of her skirt and, opening the blue box, began to powder herself, not looking at Paleyka, who stood motionless, lighting her work.
When her nose was whiter than her face she lightly touched her lips with a lipstick. She smiled a gay, agonising smile.
—It's all right now.

She removed the powder-box and the lipstick and looked at Paleyka. The small mirror was still in her hands. She straightened and after again bringing the small mirror close to her nose, touched Paleyka's chest with her hand.
—Move back.
Paleyka stepped back, submitting not to her hand at all, which had touched him like a bee. A reflection from the candle sparkled in the mirror and he wanted to extinguish it—but his lips had shrivelled.
She sat down again and put the small mirror on her knees.
—Well, now, will you keep silent again, like the last time? What do you really want of me? After all, I know where you will send me in the morning and I will say nothing to you. Anyway, I don't know anything.
She reflected briefly. Again a water spider seemed to slide on to her cheeks. The spider has a comical name—"mzya".
—I wanted to leave behind...
—To me?
—Not to you at all, in general. I think that my plaits will serve for that. Let them remain alive... I love them.
She folded the two plaits together on her breast, playing with the fluffy ends.
"A cunning one," Paleyka thought with fury, feeling the moisture of emotion oppressive in his nose.
And he said in a deep voice:

—You have no more serious requests to make? There is something else, perhaps?
—That is amusing! This is very serious...
—Surely I am to be counted on in the sense, shall we say, of giving some slight assistance. At any rate, we shall scrape up some somewhere.
—Assistance ... phew! And besides ... you should understand. He who serves, who co-operates in any way with louts, loses nobility. And I do not accept services from those who have lost that virtue. Go away. I no longer need you. Thank you for the candle-end. Yes, there is something else: permit me to comb my hair for tomorrow, otherwise tomorrow I shall not have time. Don't put the candle-end down.
Calmly, with the same practised gesture as her words, the woman began to unplait her hair.
Paleyka quickly put the candle-end down on the floor. His large, clumsy shadow rushed across the wall, breaking off at the ceiling. The head on the ceiling turned into a block of wood. He sat down beside the woman and caught her hands, not allowing her to collect her thoughts.
—Is that your assistance? Eh? Foo, how nasty, just to think of it... Go away. And you have touched me, too: your hands are dirty, look, the nails are broken, short, yellow ... like cigarette-ends.

She wiped her plump hands with revulsion on the skirt of the Circassian coat. Suddenly the little mirror slipped from her knees, fell to the floor and broke in half.

The woman looked fearfully at the splinters, picked them up as if not believing her eyes, gazed at them and burst into tears, stamping her feet and crying in a piercing voice:

—There is nothing but misfortune, grief and loss from you! I hate you, I hate you! Be off! I know that you will shoot me tomorrow, I know ... there was no need to break the mirror!

She threw herself on the plank bed, drew her knees up under her and began to weep, burying her head in the fur hat. Her plaits, which hung to the floor, bumped against it, trembled and sinuously unwound.

—Well, damn it! Paleyka said hoarsely. His throat was dry, as if made of papier-mâché. — Well, damn it, it was the mirror you were sorry about. Wrapped up in superstition, pure and simple.

He was silent for a moment, feeling in his pocket for his handkerchief. The Hungarian handkerchief was his last. It was frayed round the edges. There would be no more handkerchiefs like that for Paleyka, and no more fairy-tale romance like that, either. Kaput.

—I shall leave it.

The woman was silent.

—I shall put it here beside you. My fiancée gave it to me. Now she must be dead. I suggest to you that you hang it in a prominent place, not as a token of love, but if you are capable of feeling anything. I think that you will have to live a long time since, for various reasons, I propose to delay your execution.

—Although I am wearing boots, I do not wear foot-cloths. Take the handkerchief away.

Paleyka stubbornly approached the bench, neatly spread out the handkerchief and firmly banged the door, saying sternly to the two Tartars on guard:

—Keep a close watch on her—she's a bitch.

The Tartar only spat from the corner of his mouth.

—We know.

He raised his rifle and spat again.

—We understand everything, fellow.

Seeing someone entering, Omekhin half-rose from his cot.

—What?

—Nothing.

—You talked?

Paleyka uttered a short laugh, his bushy brows shooting up.

—You're lucky with the women, Comrade Paleyka. Ye-es, you're a lucky one. I'm a good shot, after all, but I missed—you were in luck. And at what—a mouse. It was of her own free will...

—Of course.

—Swine. Her brother was killed, many others were killed, too, and now, four days later... Just get married after that. We are going to have a lot of trouble with her now.
—What trouble? We shall send her to the place appointed.
—And how do you feel, Comrade Paleyka?
—I've had my fun—enough.
—Yes ... it's good in one sense and bad in other. You're lucky with the women, Comrade Paleyka.
—Yes, I'm lucky, Paleyka sighed.
The sand does not cool during the night, like the heart. The sands roam right through the desert, like blood through the body. Who will protect the saksaul bushes from whirlwinds? The sand winds itself in clouds around the saksauls.

CHAPTER SIX

The wooden cot was harder than a saddle. The seams of the spread-out greatcoat were quite impossible—ropes, not seams. Tomorrow, no doubt, there would be red weals over his entire body, the stamp of those thick, coarse tailor's seams. He should make the tailor himself sleep on this greatcoat, on his tenderest place. He would see how the tailor began to twist and turn, groan and scratch. But the seams were not the only reason or

scratching. As he writhed Omekhin mumbled:
—Lace ... lice...
All the same, it would have done no harm to call the tailor to account, to ensure that he sewed more neatly.Word should be sent, but...
—The devil take it, what a life! You sit like a louse on a frying-pan—fat all round and nothing to eat. It would be good to have a woman, living like this.
"The commander is there on the other side of the wall, asleep already. Snoring like a pig, probably..."
Omekhin listened closely.
"Not a sound. That means he's satisfied."
—The devil with it, why should I be thinking about him!
Taking some shag tobacco, he lit a pipe. He lay down again, covering himself with one skirt of his greatcoat. The air was as close as in a grocer's shop. A patrol rushed past. He had slept on a greatcoat for years without feeling any pain, but now... And suddenly he recalled the smell of thyme. If a girl dreamed of it, she would repeat a spell against it five times over... And now you have to go and check the guard... Better to think about ploughing. Ploughing on a hot spring morning. Ploughing... planting... lust... lowing... lust...
From boredom he read a little dictionary of foreign words, all of which were Russian... The word "foreign" had been used to increase sales. What a joke.

...It was a real Easter-cake night. The smell was the same as at Easter-time. The moon, probably, and the alien hills. The moon here was the same as if every day were Easter...
He threw off his greatcoat. The buttons struck the wall crisply. Omekhin retrieved his boots from under his head.
—I'll go and have a look at the guard.
He began to pull on his boots, trying not to jingle his spurs. But now he distinctly heard a woman's cry, the bellowing of several voices and then a shot; strangely enough, there was no echo from the hills. It was just like a dream, where you can never hear an echo.
Omekhin stopped short at the threshold.
A lantern flickered by the cob-house and a partisan knocked a hastily tied-on sabre against its glass. A fantastic croaking loud laughter was heard by it. The stray dogs howled in the bushes beyond the camp.
—Quiet! We-ell...
A partisan in a kaftan seized him by the arm and pointed with a laugh at three Tartars, shouting loudly into his ear as if the shooting was continuing:
—Just you look at them ... at those ugly mugs. They wanted ... ha-ha...
—What's going on here, eh, you fellows?
In a corner of the cob-house the woman was weeping, a knife in one hand and the fur hat in the other. No doubt she was ashamed to be seen weeping and for this reason she was

shrieking in an intolerably high voice:
—Monsters! Butchers! Today the commissar threw himself on me and now a whole herd of them want... Shoot me, don't torment me! Now, right this minute! Swine!
Omekhin unfastened the holster of his revolver and glanced at the round-shouldered Tartar, who was one of the sentries.
—Well?
The Tartar stood with his hands against the seams of his trousers. His face suddenly became covered with sweat and his eyelids grew puffy. He glanced round at the others.
—No woman. I've put up with it four months, since I left Ufa, no woman. She's going to be shot tomorrow anyway, the commissar gave her a feel, we need a little squeeze. He... The Tartar pointed pathetically at his meagre beard, down which blood was oozing.
—He stuck his knife here and started to cut me up. Why do we have no woman?
The kaftan-wearer's voice rose to a shriek:
—Just look at this ugly mug, brother, just look at him! He needs a woman! Put up with it, put up with it the way the revolution puts up with you, eh?
And he clapped his rifle against his boots in ecstasy.
—They let off a pop into the air to frighten her... To take the spunk out of her.
—Lock her up, Omekhin said with irritation. Lock her up tight... You guard her in the

meantime, he said, pointing to the man in the kaftan.
The latter drew his sword for some reason and froze, only his teeth laughing in the darkness. They seemed to be visible ten *sazhens* away from the cob-house, where Omekhin, the Tartars and Paleyka withdrew.
Lanterns stood on the warm rocks, which appeared sweaty. A trashy wind barely stirred the skirts of the greatcoats.
—Since... Omekhin said, glancing at the rock.
A candle smoked and no-one wanted to snuff it, which caused Omekhin to feel constantly increasing irritation.
—Since the leadership of our glorious partisan detachment has been negligent in not immediately putting an end to her, while her further presence will bring disgrace upon our detachment, I find it necessary to pronounce revolutionary sentence without delay. In order to avoid anarchistic escapades in the future, the sentries Gadein, Alim Kashy and Zakiya Kyzymbaev are sentenced to the supreme measure of punishment; however, taking into consideration their lack of enlightenment, the sentence is conditional. Until it is carried out, they are to mount guard over the citizeness ... and thus make amends for the wrong they have done. Otherwise they will go to the devil. Is that clear? Any objections? Are there any objections?

—No, Paleyka replied.
Continuing to gaze at the rock, Omekhin said to the Tartars:
—You are sentenced conditionally to be shot. Go to your places and mount guard without any more incidents. Understood?
The Tartars suddenly joined hands and stepped back.
—Well?!
—Er, understood, Lekse Petrovich, er...
And the round-shouldered Tartar bowed low, almost to the ground.
—Er...
—Permission to report that they may not have understood, Paleyka said. Perhaps you should explain to them?
What explanations are needed, if they are not asking for mercy? It's clear enough.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the morning hoof prints were found leading towards the mountains. Four horses had galloped off and on the lightest of them, Paleyka's brown pacer, she, Yelena Kanashvili, had evidently raced beside the other three.
All sorts of things happen in life, just as all sorts of water flow in rivers, but Omekhin was in a very bad humour that morning. He sat in the saddle, his long thin legs dangling over the rug, and watched with irritation as

Paleyka chose a horse from the herd.
—What are you up to?! he shouted to him. It's clear you proved bad in bed since she's run off. You didn't fix yourself to her neck well enough.
Paleyka shouted and struck at the herd with a stick. The horses scattered, the drumming of hooves was heard from behind the tent and Paleyka rode forth on an unsaddled horse.
—Camma-ander... Do you want to ride without a saddle?! You aren't a gadfly. Give him a saddle!
The Tartars grasped Paleyka by the elbows.
—I shall give you my saddle for luck, Omekhin said. But not a horse, you'll lose it.
Six more riders dashed after Paleyka.
Paleyka rushed forward alone, following no path, stumbling against bushes, rocks and ruts. He jerked at the bridle of his horse, which often reared up and whirled on the spot, trying even to throw off its rider with his incomprehensible wishes.
He seemed to be galloping in pursuit of the fugitives and at the same time to be galloping away from Omekhin.
Nevertheless, Omekhin caught up with him on the steep mountain trail by Mount Ay Ol. Turning at the sound of the hooves, Paleyka shouted:
—They will kill us like cockroaches, Aleksey Petrovich. There are four of them.
Omekhin sat in the saddle as confidently as he

did when reading a book, when reading the dictionary of foreign words which he regarded with unmatched contempt. His legs squeezed the horse's sides firmly and were rectangular, blunt and dull.

Six versts from the camp, a few paces away from the track, they saw the corpse of the fugitive sentry Alim Kashy. His skull had been split open by sabre-blow. A blade had slipped and slashed his field shirt, exposing his sunken, tubercular chest.

—So he needed a woman, said Omekhin, remaining on his horse. I think that he refused to go on with them into the mountains. He didn't want to betray the working class. Bury him, therefore, otherwise the wolves will eat him.

The dry, weathered crags showed black in the distance. The horses' sides had to be squeezed very tightly, until bloody weals appeared, if they were to muster their exhausted strength again and again.

Then, by the Agate Rock, they came upon the stretched out body of a partisan's horse and its rider—the sentry Gadein. He had been a handsome man of towering stature, cheerful and boisterous. His twisted hands were tangled in the reins. The disfigured head of the horse lay beside him.

Gadein was still alive. He raised his deadened lids and barely audibly, as if with his eyelids, asked Omekhin:

—Have you come to shoot me? I fled your bullet in vain. Better to die from my own bullet—to die kaput. He said—let us flee, he will kill us, we will be shot all the same. Kashi said, let us flee, Zakiya said, let us flee, they will shoot us all the same. Ha, where would you flee from your regiment, Tartar? Ha... Zakiya has no woman. Zakiya is a ram. Zakiya shot me in the nut, like the woman asked. Don't shoot me in the mug, Alexey Petrovich, shoot me straight in the heart.

—Yes, Omekhin said, picking up his reins,—he will soon be over. You were right—he didn't understand what "conditionally" meant. He turned round. What does "conditionally" mean? A smart lad from Penza stiffened in his saddle.

—Conditionally means that people should be killed, but are spared because they are good fellows, comrade commissar.

The nearest mountain was waist-high in bushes, like a skirt; further up it was bare, craggy. A horse was grazing in the bushes. Drawing its puffy lips high, it cheerfully plucked at the prickly grass. The appearance of people did not disturb it.

It was rested and refreshed and neighed joyfully. Far ahead of the horse a corpse lay face down in the rocky path. Its dirty fingers were thrust into a crevice in the rock. Four revolver bullets had been pumped into it—into the back, the head and the neck. Quite pointlessly.

—That was the woman, Omekhin said.
From now on the tracks were those of a single horse.
Omekhin looked at the mountains. The bushes ended and the bare rock was exposed. High up, somewhere in the snows, an aul showed grey. Smoke was visible among the crags. Perpetual heat emanated from the rocks. Omekhin pulled his left rein while himself swinging to the right.
—Enough! From now on it's we who'll be shot. Turn back, comrade. Take the horse. I'm sorry about your pacer, Maxim Semyonych, but we'll catch it sometime, God willing.
Behind his back he heard Paleyka whispering.
—Comrade, have you noticed—the last one has her hair in his hands...
—Well?
—He was the ugliest after all. Zakiya, who killed the rest. He was able to grab her by the hair...
Omekhin reined in his horse, drew level with Paleyka and leaned towards him so that he became aware of the smell of kumiss and goat's-milk cheese.
—Well, and even if he grabbed her by the hair... Hair is grabbed to beat the woman like that, not to die for her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They rode in silence until they reached the torrent that flowed by the camp. When the horse's hooves aroused the home-made wooden bridge and the water seemed to swirl even more rapidly, Paleyka caught up with Omekhin. Gripping the pommel of his saddle, he mumbled:

—Actually, I lied to you, Alexey Petrovich, about everything possible. Maybe she's his wife, maybe his sister ... or a Polish spy. I didn't sleep with her and nothing happened and it's a pity you missed the mouse. It would have been better if I had missed. I only gave her a blue kerchief.

—Well?

—So that she should show me it in her hand if she wanted in general to be nice, but she...

Omekhin suddenly turned round heavily in his saddle and cried, as if distressed:

—She stole it?!

Paleyka's gaunt cheekbones broke out in sweat, the rein slipped and he lied:

—She burned it. She showed me the ashes afterwards, after the Tartars. Ashes. How much ash is there from silk? The same as from a cigarette.

A viscous warmth filled Omekhin's veins. He felt sleepy and his stirrup grew heavy and seemed to slip under his foot.

—Well, to hell with her, he said lazily. We'll have to draw up a report. I want to have a

look at the cob-house in the daytime as well, to see how they got away. I'm sorry for the Tartars... Paleyka's blue silk kerchief was nailed to the door of the house with a thin nail, where the handle was.

—I see, Omekhin said thoughtfully, watching as Paleyka, without even jumping from his horse, hurriedly tore down the kerchief.

—I see. The lousy female was laughing at you. If I see her, I'll put six bullets into her.

He rode a short distance away and stopped, looked at Paleyka, shook his head and suddenly jumping off his horse, went on foot towards the tent. A partisan who was passing by seized the reins of his horse.

In the evening Omekhin took his rifle, changed the clip and for some reason removed the spurs from his boots, although he was very fond of wearing them.

The gun seemed very heavy and the night intolerably close and the only cause for satisfaction was that the mountains could not be seen in the darkness.

He sat down close to the small bridge over the torrent. The water seemed to have fallen. It smelled of flowery, mountain smells. Omekhin had not slept the previous night, either, and everything seemed salty to him. His temples grew heavy and the darkness of the night weighed intolerably on him.

Tiny stones, sharp as needles, seemed constantly to be falling down underfoot. The

fires in the camp went out and soon a patrol returned over the bridge. The men were laughing loudly and one of them tossed a handful of mountain nuts into the torrent.

Omekhin sat like that for a long time. His legs were cramped by an oppressive pain in his veins. He put his rifle to one side. Somewhere in the sky a spot of green and yellow dawn flashed and it was then that he heard muffled hoof-beats.

A rider was approaching the bridge slowly, from the direction of the camp. He stopped for a moment and urged on his horse in a loud whisper. The horse's hooves rang out sharply.

—Is that you, Paleyka? Omekhin called.

The rider shivered and cried in an unnaturally loud voice:

—Yes!

—Raise your head higher. I'll show you where to run.

Omekhin pressed the stock of his rifle firmly to his shoulder, according to regulations.

The horse jerked away at the shot, reared twice and fled back to the camp, its saddle empty.

Omekhin turned the corpse over, and drew a package wrapped in a blue Magyar handkerchief from a side-pocket of the field shirt. It contained a little money and Paleyka's papers. He threw both papers and money into the water after the corpse, thrusting the

handkerchief into his pocket.
Then, for some unknown reason, he built a fire of saksaul. He lit a cigarette and spread out the handkerchief in front of him, he took a twig with a burning end and stuck it into the middle of the handkerchief. There was a smell of burning and Omekhin tossed the handkerchief into the fire with the stick. He said to the headquarters secretary who had approached:
—I ought to see the end of that film the Tartars interrupted. It would be interesting to find out what the lesson of their love turned out to be.
—You can't see the end of it, Comrade commissar, the secretary replied.
—Why is that?
—Because it's two weeks since the projectionist, Comrade Glushkov, went off elsewhere after changing his mules for horses with your permission since the mules, as you know, were eaten by the wolves because of a lack of herd solidarity, and observation.
—Two weeks?
—Precisely.
—Well, now, that's the way it goes. Life moves like...
But Comrade Omekhin did not, in fact, complete just how his life was going. He just smiled sadly.
Boulders in the mountains are solid and bright. The ground beneath them is cheerful and green. The sun's flame in the mountains was

extinguished and clouds, like ash on a man's camp-fire, covered the rocks.
There was that grass again! Such steadfast grass: you couldn't masticate it or crush it.
And still through the tough grass, from somewhere by Tyumen through the sands, through the Urals and other steppes, through the partisan detachment of Comrade Omekhin the agitator, projectionist and general windbag Yevdokim Petrovich Glushkov continued further on his way.

1925

SMOKOTININ'S LIFE

When, for the first time after the long wars, carpenters came to the village to build a new hut for the rich peasant Afinogenov in place of the one that had burned down, they had to suffer a great many gibes. You've forgotten your trade, people called out. You can't tell aspens from pines now. But all the same, it was pleasant to feel that a time had come when it was worth doing things, when a man could build and work with a purpose. And everyone walked around the yellow logs piled up and felt good axes of the Zlatoust make.

The contractor building the hut was a local man, Yevgraf Smokotinin, a short, broad-footed old fellow. Yevgraf had been frightened by the war, the famine, by incomprehensible taxes and he was even more frightened when,

after a long break, he became a contractor again. In one small district he had worked hard and well to build a shop for a co-operative; he was supposed to receive payment afterwards, but then the co-operative had gone and failed! There had been a court case, but no one could work out who was to blame and there was no one to claim from. After this he ceased once and for all to trust anyone and demanded payment for himself in advance. As a way of training his children he fell sick or pretended to the day before work began on the hut and sent his youngest son, Timofey, to supervise construction. Timofey, who had a rosy, open face and a ringing voice, found supervising the work and keeping the carpenters on the job uninteresting. He seized an axe, selected a massive log and struck it. The axe rang and the log groaned... The morning proved cool; the dew had not yet dried on the undersides of leaves: doves cooed by the barn—and their voices were business-like, like everything else that morning. Seeing how hard their master was working, the carpenters, too, grasped their axe-handles firmly. They were not local and did not like this well-fed village; they wanted to show it what real work was and their master seemed to want take up the challenge.

At this moment Katerina Shepelova, a widow, came out of the barn: her husband had been killed in the war and she had been left with a

child. How she lived, no one knew—it was said that the district co-operative ordered mittens from her for sale. But how much can one earn from mittens? Often, at night, an unknown hand reached out of the darkness through an open window, placing a bag of food on the sill: secret charity. She was a tall woman, large and silent; she held her head slightly askew and seemed to sweep the ground with her long, chestnut eyelashes. Coming round the pile of logs, which smelled strongly of resin, she drew level with the carpenters and slowly, as if ashamed, took a large shaving, some one and a half arshins long, bending low over it. The carpenters glanced at the master, who was making the chips fly from a log: he had thought of making a roof-beam from it, but to his shame there was an enormous knot in it—and roof-beams are not supposed to have knots.

—The woman is like a window, she should have a proper frame: you'll be warm and light here, said one of the carpenters, looking after Katerina.

Timofey raised his head, only then noticing Katerina.

—Who gave her the shaving?

—She took it herself, the same carpenter replied, his voice taking on an edge: evidently the master, who was young and stupid, did not know the custom whereby carpenters could give shavings to whomsoever they wanted.

Because the roof-beam had not been a success and because the carpenters' tone made it clear that he had said something stupid, Timofey became angry. He hurried over to Katerina, who had already gone behind the barn, seized her by the sleeve of her blue jacket and shouted irritably:

—Who gave you permission to filch shavings?

Katerina swung her shoulders smoothly. Her jacket was old, patched and not properly buttoned and probably worn next to her naked body, for she pressed the shaving to her breast as if it were a child—and this movement seemed to make a shudder run through Timofey. He stretched out his hand—he was not backward with women—and instead of the shaving grabbed her breast through the unbuttoned gap in her jacket. Katerina did not react like other women: she did not screech, did not squirm, but stood firm and did not even seem to hurry in pushing him away.

—That's enough, was all Katerina said and she released the shaving. It slowly slipped down and the end stuck in the ground, gently swaying before collapsing as if sighing. Katerina put her hands under her shawl and turned, and suddenly it seemed to Timofey that his heart had slipped as well as the shaving, had stuck up in the same way, swayed in the same way...

—Be off, you stuck-up madam, he shouted

and returned to his work, clapping the shaving he had taken against his boot. But it was heavy and he felt as if he were slapping himself with a log.

—A penny to live on and a chip of wood to warm you, the same carpenter gibed.

But Timofey did not snap at him.

He was about to choose a new log for the roof-beam, but suddenly he discovered that the entire forest was gnarled and damp, that the site chosen for the hut was sloping and would have to be dug out and levelled and that the carpenters were idlers, who smoked and laughed a lot. He wanted to go home to drink tea and perhaps to bathe in the river.

—He'll be worse than his dad, the derisive carpenter said as he walked away. A hard boss for the working man.

And all the carpenters agreed with his words.

His father lay on a shelf above the stove and when his son entered he moaned and groaned. Timofey was revolted by his pretence. His father began questioning him about the course of the work. A boiling samovar stood on the table and Timofey's sister poured tea and moved the sugar towards him in a glass sugar-bowl like a milk-pail. Timofey did not answer his father and berated his sister:

—All you know is how to drink tea and it costs two rubles a loaf! He went down to the river. On the opposite bank the women gathering currants were calling to each other

in the thickets and even this made him angry. He was about to pull off his boots to bathe. His foot-cloths were hot and had twisted themselves into a tube remotely resembling the shape of his leg. He thumped the cloth with his fist.

The summer proved quiet and full of scents. Towards evening light rain would fall, tapping out a delicate tracery in the dust; the dew was heavy and warm; may-bugs—fragrant beetles which fluttered about in the evening—poked themselves into people's hair, as if playing, congratulating them on the harvest. This was a summer for working, for building, for ploughing all the fields, and putting up buildings everywhere, across the entire neighbourhood!

But after that morning Timofey did not so much as set eyes on the building site. His father cursed and cursed and then came himself to take charge. Timofey did not want to do farm work, either, but everyone came back from the fields tired so that there was no one to drink with and even the making of home-brew fell off. Timofey thought of going along the river with a drag-net, but as soon as he dipped his feet in the water he was almost overcome by nausea.

—What is it, he said confusedly, lowering the drag-net on to the warm sand, have they put the evil eye on me or something?

In the evening an old woman, a leech,

sprinkled him with holy water and gave him some to drink, but this, too, did not relieve him. He even began to sleep badly. He promised the same quack a wollen skirt if she would bring Katerina to the hayloft at night. The old woman was thrown into a panic.
—It would be better to bring you Lizaveta—she isn't so skinny and can be persuaded. Katerina will never agree. They say she made a vow before her husband. Maybe if you promise her a real present, like a pair of boots...
But Katerina gave even the old woman the same dark word in reply: "Enough," and the old woman, after looking fixedly at her eyelashes, suddenly hissed and waved her hands.
The heat began in the sky and there was fever in the heart. The ears of corn ripened and the dawns, like the fields, were drunk with their own satiety and gaiety.
At that time Timofey implored his father to buy him a horse and he went away to the town to drive a cab. However, he proved a quite exceptionally bad cab-driver. Even though he would pull up at the busiest intersections, like that by the small green church which resembled a bast-basket of mushrooms; even though his horse was well-fed and his carriage new, painted a sky-blue colour; even though the young fellow himself was dashing—yet when a fare approached—a

drunk, an idiot—he would look at the driver and turn to the next man. Timofey never looked for customers; when he picked up his pay he turned his steps towards the pub, where he put his elbows on a table and hurriedly drank beer. Silently, as when waiting at an intersection—seeing no one—he gazed at the tables. Once, on a holiday, it happened that he made seven rubles and he went with his room-mates to a tavern. One of these friends, nasal and pimply, discribed how, the previous day, he had dishonoured a girl. His audience chuckled for a long time over each word.

—Well, I'll chuck her, a crybaby like that, the nasal man concluded.

—And you wouldn't take pity on her? Timofey asked suddenly.

—What? said the other in amazement. Timofey shook his head—and called for a glass of vodka. His friends also drank a glass to keep him company. Then Timofey said:

—And I ... I ruined a widow, I didn't want to marry and she even said to me: the man for whom I'm sighing, in dust will soon be lying.

There was only half a glass of vodka left. They began to discuss what they would drink next—beer or vodka. All of them had long since forgotten Timofey's words, but he wanted to finish his explanation of why he had not married and how her words had proved to be lies and only after them had he

really got lucky: he was earning a pile of money and would soon buy a carriage with pneumatic tyres... There was a lot he wanted to talk about, but there just wasn't a chance. In the morning he drank off his hang-over in the same tavern. His head immediately became unusually clear and he felt more cheerful than he had for a long time. Again he took his stand at that same noisy intersection by the small green church that resembled a bast-basket of mushrooms. He cast a lively eye on all sides and an old man in a long-skirted surtout, pointing to him with emotion, said to the young woman walking beside him: "The merchant Gavrilov. Once he controlled thousands and now look what he has come to—a cab-driver." Timofey enjoyed hearing that he had been taken for a merchant. But suddenly a woman in a blue dress moved away to the right from a man with a tray—a pie-vendor. Her delicate hands were so familiar, unique, their movements concealed beneath her shawl, her walk unique, melancholy... Immediately the clear-headedness which had been fluttering in Timofey flew away, like a flower torn off by the wind from a briar-rose; his eyes prickled... He wanted to cry out, he seized the reins and the horse seemed to recognise her—it was always subdued, but now it dashed into the crowd! A boy with a bag was knocked over, scattering books, a pie-vendor fell, an old lady

in a long grey shawl got into the scramble... And Timofey shouted: "Stop her, stop her! " as he lashed at the animal. A rubicund militiaman whistled, amused by the confusion, the sound of his whistle and the incomprensible event.

Timofey was arrested. He spent a week inside and was then released: he was thought to be mad. During that week the horse had become emaciated, as if it, too, were ashamed. Timofey sold the horse, drank away the money and returned to the village in ragged boots. His father had already contracted to build his fourth hut that year, but was still just as frightened. Plump geese strolled in the stubble of the corn-fields; in the mornings the first ice appeared along the river and the aspens turned a deep yellow. Katerina, even in her thoughts, had not been in the town. She continued to walk about the village in the same patched blue dress; she seemed to have been given someone else's life to lead and was getting on with it.

Soon after Timofey's return a wolf killed one of the family's foals in the field. The foal was skinned and the carcass dragged to a ravine, into the bushes. Timofey's father gave him a blunderbuss loaded with buck-shot and ordered him to sit in the bushes: who knows, wolves are vicious in autumn and hungry and it might by chance come to the meat. And indeed, at dawn a pair of wolves did appear in

the bushes of meadow-sweet above the ravine—Timofey had never imagined that wolves had such huge heads. He fired and the wolves jumped; one of them began limping. But Timofey was bored and sleepy. "I'll find them tomorrow," he thought, and set off home. The village was still asleep, but when he came into the street smoke had already appeared from the chimneys and the small windows gleamed with orange reflections from the stoves. The window of Katerina's small hut also flickered with an orange flame. Timofey glanced in. Katerina was standing side-on to him and pulling fire-lighters from off the stove. The stove was evidently burning badly and she wanted to put the fire-lighters into the hearth. Again Timofey saw her hands: delicate, white and seeming fluffy, in some way recalling flax. When she touched her breast, it was as if summer lightning flashed: not casting light but disturbing both her own face and those of others. Her, standing immobile with the wood... Timofey was even touched by a kind of emotion. But scarcely had she moved and lowered her hands to her hips, scarcely had the line of her breasts appeared, as if a steep bank had jutted out of the mist, than Timofey felt loathsome and ashamed—of the fact that he had even thought of marrying her and had not found it in himself to tell his father and her of this, of again expecting to hear that word "enough"

and of the fact that he, apparently, a healthy and bold man was standing like a beggar under the window, fearing not only to enter but even to think of doing so.

To free himself from such thoughts Timofey spat juicily and then became conscious of the weight of the gun on his shoulder. He took a cartridge and could not remember whether it contained buck-shot or small-shot. "It doesn't matter—I'm three paces away," he thought and that unusual clear-headedness that had come once at the intersection by the small green church again flooded over him.

He did not kill her—the charge hit her in the shoulder. She lay for a month and a half under a sheepskin that had been sent by Timofey's father and did not appear at the trial. Timofey could explain nothing to the court—he was ashamed to talk of witchcraft, although he wanted to. "It was like a shaving at my heart," he said and spread his hands. The court gave Timofey a year. After he had served his sentence he no longer returned to his own village. He had made many acquaintances in prison and began to roam about fairs with his new acquaintances and sit in taverns with gypsies. Life seemed easy, not real and all the time he thought: I must go to my father, bow myself down at his feet and say...—but what he should say, even he himself did not yet know. And there was never any time to go to his father and his

clothes were in tatters.
Again it was autumn. There were frosts and the sky seemed to be covered with rime. Some unusual Argamak horses had been brought to one of the fairs from somewhere near Orenburg. The peasants had begun to take a fancy to pedigree horses and the gypsies proposed a deal to Timofey. But the men who had driven the horses to the fair were also experienced and were more cunning than the gypsies. The Argamak horses stood in a barn, one wall of which faced a dark lane. The gypsies sawed out a board. "Climb in," the youngest said to him impatiently. Timofey leaped, and an unheard-of pain struck him in the knee—wolf-traps had been set by the wall. He cried out. Torches blinked and someone fired. Timofey was beaten for a long time with fists and a lash in order to find out where the gypsies were. He gave them away. Then he was struck in the side with a log and thrown into a ravine beyond the village. One of his eyes was knocked out, he began to limp—and he acquired a sordid reputation. Now, even when drunk, he did not think of returning to his father. The gypsies drove him away, he became completely threadbare and went hungry and once the young fellows of a neighbouring village suggested to him that he kill someone. They promised him felt boots and a sheepskin coat for the murder and agreed to drive him to the town.

—Yes, my lads, she's brought me to this, the bitch! All right, I'll do it! he cried. He heard his own voice—and asked for vodka. They gave him half a glass and in the sledge, lying among the young fellows, he lied to them about his love for a priest's daughter and how the priest had driven him away and had incited the village to expel him... The young fellows chuckled, it was not clear at what, until they reached the corner of a large five-walled cabin. They proposed to Timofey that he knock at the window, call for Ignat and stick a knife in his stomach when he came out. Timofey followed these instructions. Ignat came out, a tall peasant in a long sheepskin who looked like a priest. There was a high, calm moon and Ignat's face, too, was calm. His coat seemed blue and the collar was like clouds.
—Don't get in people's way, Timofey shouted, striking him with a knife.
However, the knife slipped and suddenly everything turned upside down in Timofey's body. He clearly felt the bitter snow in his mouth, a staggering snowdrift—and the moon slipped between his hands...
In the morning Timofey was found behind the barn, by an ice-hole in the stream, dead. His head was smashed in three places and his gums were completely bare, like those of a child. His home village lay thirty versts away and people thought that his father would not come, but he did, with a pair of greys...

He looked at his son's face, made the sign of the cross and after covering him with a table-cloth ordered him to be put in the sledge.
And so Timofey lay for the last time at home, beneath the ikons. A bald church deacon read his prayer-book, a cat played with the fringe of the table-cloth and Timofey's sister prepared a commemorative meal. All was calm, without lamentations and without fuss. In the passage the carpenters planed the coffin and the mocking carpenter, who had once worked on Afinogenov's hut with Timofey, teased a recently married friend. Many people came to farewell the deceased. To make it easier to walk through the carpenters pushed into the corner the honey-coloured shavings that were scattered in all the corridors. Katerina came, too. She crossed herself, adjusted the copper coins that had slipped from Timofey's eyes and kissed his forehead. The coins made his face scared and shy. "That's enough," Katerina said in a whisper and crossed herself again. In the passage she looked at the coffin. The carpenters were resting and smoking and there was a strong smell of shag tobacco. She drew her shawl tightly into a knot on her bosom so that it should not slip from her shoulders and bent down to the floor. And no one now prevented her from picking up shavings.

1926

LETTER T*

In his usual carefree manner, Ivan Pankratov was fond of repeating that he would die standing at the type fount and that his body would be carried out of the composing room as a letter is taken from the galley—face to the wall and not to the ceiling. His workmates admired him for his carefree ways, for his liveliness and his cheerful greying head, and also for those five wrinkles that cut across his rosy face like so many scars, telling the world that this was a man who had seen many winds and much sun.

Ivan had long been aware that his sight was beginning to fail—the bright sky with its jolly clouds was not so bright any more and

*English translation © Progress Publishers 1974

the grey of evening set in earlier. He was transferred from letter-press to theatre bills, but he still made too many mistakes. The management begged his pardon when they transferred him to the job of taking copy round to other compositors and of distributing used type. Ivan was not down-hearted even at this, and only said that his hands probably shook because of his age; he said nothing about his eyes—he seemed to have kept quiet about many things in the course of his life.

And because of his optimism and his fine spirit, and because they were sorry for him, his fellow workers put pieces of black paper in the type boxes before he began distributing type from a used form. Ivan would distribute his stint for the day and next morning the others would lift out the paper and put the letters in the proper boxes; for Ivan had grown so blind that letters went into neighbouring boxes—"k" into "l", for instance. Ivan was afraid of newcomers to the printing works, it was difficult for him to get used to them, their faces seemed to merge into a blue haze...

On the day our story begins Mishka Blagoveshchensky started work in the shop. He was young, no more than sixteen, but with a wealth of experience behind him. In his short, homeless life he had travelled the length and breadth of Russia and had been in

most of the big cities. Mishka was in a bad mood when he came to work; furthermore, there were rumours in the town that the *basmachi** and Whiteguards were advancing from the desert. It was said that they were led by Ataman Kashimirov, a Cossack officer notorious for his cruelty—and Mishka was a coward, he boasted of his cowardice, and so nobody believed in it. He arrived at the printing works early in the morning. A boy apprentice was already re-sorting Ivan Pankratov's mixed letters and was complaining of his degrading job, so Mishka greeted Ivan with malicious laughter. Ivan walked with a light, confident step and when he stopped in the doorway, his white forelock was above the lintel.

Yershov, the make-up man, called Mishka behind a printing-press, where he was out of sight, and brought his turpentine-soaked fist within an inch of the lad's nose, drawing his short, angry-looking eyebrows together in a frown. Mishka said no more after that and Ivan realised that the others had not allowed him to speak.

It was a dull day with clouds hanging low after two weeks of rain. Clay oozed from under the sand, giving off a sickening smell of rot. The steamer *Volna Revolyutsii* was

*Gangs of bandits in Central Asia who fought against Soviet power.—*Tr.*

moving slowly down the Amu Darya towards the small town of X, carrying two companies of Red Army troops, some field-guns and munitions. The steamer was coming to the aid of the town for it was a fact, and no rumour, that the *basmachi* were advancing on the town from the desert. It was making slow progress because the Amu Darya flows through sandy desert and frequently changes its course: it has numerous sand-bars and shallows and its waters are swift-flowing and dangerous. There had been buoys marking the bars but the *basmachi* had destroyed them—and, even if they hadn't, there would have been no one left to look after them, anyway. Every night the steamer dropped anchor and every night there was cursing, because the soldiers wanted the vessel to keep going at night! .. In their way they were right; it was more dangerous to sleep than to keep moving. The little flat-bottomed boats of the *basmachi* could not be heard on account of the rustling of the reeds in the wind... All lights were doused on the boat and the crew kept their rifles at the ready. At last the time came when the soldiers were informed that it was no more than ten or fifteen versts to the town. But heavy rain began to fall and the sky was completely overcast. The raging waters of the Amu Darya were shut in on both sides by brownish-yellow sand-hills.

On one of the hills stood a huge, bare tree,

crowned with a raven's nest. The sailors went ashore and climbed the hill. The raven would not let them climb the tree and attacked them several times (under the tree lay the shells of young tortoises that the young ravens apparently fed on). There came a flash of lightning and a careful sailor shot at the raven, the thunder drowning the sound of the shot. Before them lay an endless bluish-brown plain covered with gravel. In the distance they could see some purple hills but nothing that looked like a town. The crew were beginning to lose heart. They argued softly for a long time and eventually decided to drop anchor. Then the odour of rot reached them from the banks. The tightly strained anchor chain vibrated in the tiny, savage waves. The river, a dirty yellow, heavy and cold, raced past the vessel...

In the town the Revolutionary Committee had been expecting the steamer for a long time and for two days already the landing-stage has been decorated with small red pennants (they were already fading and the fierce rain had torn some of them down). Half the town was inhabited by Cossacks and the Revolutionary Committee feared many of them would take sides with the *basmachi* and the Whiteguards, and was afraid to call on the Cossacks to defend the town although the rest of the population had been mobilised. Despite the rain the Cossacks went about

fully armed, singing and playing their mouth-organs brought from the front; this all served to intensify the anxiety. Those occupying the trenches outside the town on the desert side looked mostly towards the town, listening gloomily to its noises. The desert was dark and damp.

Farther away, some twenty versts or so from the town, the *basmachi* had made a camp in the hills by tying together the tops of bushes and covering them with horse rugs and saddle cloths; in these shelters they slept, the Ataman, General Kashimirov, among them. They had traversed almost the entire Kyzyl Kum desert, the town was not far away and beyond it the Amu Darya, and beyond the Amu Darya was holy, fragrant Khiva! The *basmachi* and the Ataman, however, believed that the town was strong! At last they caught a Kirghiz *uyanchi*, a wandering minstrel, on his way from Khiva to Bukhara; this minstrel told them that the Russians had been diverting the waters of the Amu Darya for the last three days, that the Russians possessed a strength that could not be described even in song, that the Russians were great titans; at this point Ataman Kashimirov shot the minstrel in the mouth. Then the *basmachi* decided that the *uyanchi* had been sent to them as a spy; wet whips flashed and there was a jingle of stirrups. The *basmachi* were riding towards the town.

In the town they really were digging a canal, standing in mud and slush in the pouring rain. The night the steamer *Volna Revolyutsü* dropped anchor some fifteen versts from the town, it had suddenly given a lurch. The sleepy crew were about to fire, then realised that the plash of the water around them had ceased. And through the rain next morning the soldiers saw that the river had moved about two hundred yards from the ship. The steamer was perched clumsily on the mud of the river-bed. The sailors, up to their knees in mud, dragged a boat to the river. Old tree stumps, black and slimy, jutted up on all sides. Huge fish that had not had time to get away were thrashing about in little puddles in the rain. The sailors rowed their boat to the town, and there the Revolutionary Committee ordered a further mobilisation and requisitioned picks and shovels.

Contingents fell in awkwardly and marched away to dig a canal that would carry water to the steamer. There was still a drizzle of rain, with low, grey clouds...

It was cold in the printing works, the type was sticky because there was nothing to wash it with, no turpentine and no kerosene. The ink dried and the platens in the printing-presses passed over the type without making an impression on the paper. The printers had been mobilised to dig the canal and only Ivan Pankratov and Mishka remained behind.

Ivan walked back and forth among the type cases as briskly as usual, his hands behind him, coughing as he walked and feeling sorry because he had just remembered an interesting story and there was no one to tell it to. Mishka, to avoid mobilisation, had scratched his foot on the instep with a nail and was limping and cursing; he was cutting narrow strips of paper to be pasted crosswise on the windows so that the glass would not be broken by gun-fire. Ivan Pankratov wandered back and forth, looked at the window panes and said that they ought to have been cleaned long ago, they did not let any light through. Mishka snapped back at him—they had been cleaned that very morning—and the rain had washed them after that. The old man merely went on staring with untroubled gaze at the windows he could scarcely see. Suddenly Tulumbayev, the Military Commandant of the town, appeared in the doorway.

Tulumbayev, a stooped, determined-looking man, was holding a sheet of paper covered with neat handwriting; he said that information had been received that the *basmachi* and the Ataman's forces, led by General Kashimirov, were approaching the town from the desert and would reach the trenches in an hour and a half or two hours. The Revolutionary Committee informed the printing workers that the fate of the town was in their hands. A meeting had been called in

the Cossack club, but the Cossacks would not come to it unless a manifesto was posted up all over the town; this manifesto contained the text of a telegram from the Centre which gave the Cossacks and Turkmenians equal rights to pastures and meadowlands. There was no time to get to the steamer and recall the printers. And there was nobody to send; they had to talk now, to act now! Tulumbayev gave the old printer the original of the manifesto.

"When shall I come for them?" he asked.

"In forty minutes!" answered Ivan Pankratov.

The commandant shook hands with him, touched the peak of his cap and went rapidly away, displaying resolution in his every movement. It was still drizzling outside, it seemed quiet, but confusion was beginning in the town; they did not know where to take the machine-guns—to the Executive Committee building or to the trenches outside the town. Wire was being put up across the roads.

Ivan Pankratov stood with the manifesto in his hands and saw before him a solid grey sheet with even lines on it. His neck ached unaccountably and there was a sharp pain at the temples, so sharp that it hurt him to turn round. Mishka fidgeted about in front of him, whining, and, frightened by his own cries, began stamping his feet. He shouted that he did not want to be shot because of

this old devil who had always pretended he could set type. He was sorry he had not learned something of the trade himself, he was suffering because of it—if only he knew something about the type fount in its case! Gasping with anger, Mishka seized Ivan Pankratov by the arm, by that long and heavy hand. He led the old man to the type case, ran round the table till he stood opposite him, rested his elbows on the ink-stained wood and then fell forward on to it.

"We'll be shot because of you! Our own people will shoot us... Set it up! "

The paper rolled up in Ivan's hand. The lines of writing disappeared. Suddenly he remembered about his old woman who had died shortly before. At the very last moment she had looked pitifully at him. "You, Ivan Pankratov," she had said, "are like a gadfly; you fly like a bird, you roar like an ox..." She would have said more but tears filled her eyes. At the time Ivan had been really amazed at those tears and he had decided that they meant that the old woman did not want to die, that she was sorry to part with her life. And now, as he stood there, with the copy he could not see in his hands, he realised that for a long time he had been deceiving himself and that others had deceived him and been sorry for him. He understood the meaning of many snatches of talk he had heard and realised why there had always been very

little type to distribute, and why the compositors had said that there was little work and that he, Ivan Pankratov, could take a rest, could even go home. Ivan Pankratov had gone out sometimes, and walked around the town thinking that he was enjoying an easy and worthy old age. And now it turned out that they had kept him on at the printing works, him the chatterbox and boaster, for no reason at all, that they had worked for him and fed him... And now, because of his helplessness, because of him... His heart palpitated wearily. Surely the town could not be allowed to fall because of him!

Mishka kept screaming at him.

"Get it set! " There was no limit to Mishka's curses.

Ivan Pankratov pulled frantically at the type case—the third box from the top. The table gave a jerk. Ivan set his stick to the width of the handbill and pulled the type case down on the table with a crash. He immediately picked out the letter "T"—all manifestoes began with the letter "T", but then it seemed to him that he had not got that letter but another, either the one before or the one after it. He glanced at the letter. It felt cold, heavy and dull, as though it was completely worn down, rubbed out. He glanced helplessly at the window and that, too, seemed to have been rubbed into a pink mist of cobwebs. He held the letter closer to

his eyes. The indistinct and unreadable outline of the letter gleamed between his fingers; in the mist that surrounded them they looked oddly smooth and young. But he could not tell what letter it was, he had absolutely no idea! The stick trembled in his hand.

No idea? That meant there was nothing he could do, no way he, a printer, an old worker, could help the working class and the poor peasantry, who were defending the socialist revolution... Was it possible that he, an old worker, could not muster enough strength to see the letters? Was it possible that in these minutes, when the fate of many Soviet people was being decided, he would be incapable of doing anything? Had he really become so weak-willed? That could not, must not, be!

His mind was working feverishly. He felt a shiver of cold in his toes. His head was burning. His throat was dry. He would do his job, he would manage somehow, he would make himself see the letters!

Then his brain suddenly seemed to catch fire. The joy of creative effort suddenly made him straighten his back. Tears streamed from his eyes, and seemed to sweep away the mist that had veiled them. He could see the type case and the letters quite clearly...

"Tovarishchi! " (Comrades). This was the first word he would set on his stick, using the biggest type he had.

The letter he had held in the palm of his hand now returned to his fingers; they had become more flexible, and looking at them, it struck him that he had not noticed the wrinkles on his fingers for a long time. But there was no time to think about wrinkles now. When he could not see properly he had taken the letter "S" from the next box instead of the letter "T". He threw the "S" back into its box.

"That was a mistake," he said. His hand described a semicircle between the type case and the stick as his fingers firmly grasped the letter "T"., the "O" and then "V"...

Mishka walked slowly away from the type case, looked round the shop fearfully, for some unknown reason smoothed his hair down, and then began to get the form ready to take the type from Ivan's galley; the form, with the type, is placed in the printing-press, and then the printing can begin. At first Mishka took the cleanest form he could find, then he grew bolder and winked maliciously to himself—I know that old man's just lazy, he seemed to say, he's been fooling them all the time. So, he took up the dirtiest and rustiest of the forms. Ivan Pankratov, still filled with this extraordinary sense of joy and even aching with it (there was a sharp pain in his chest and his temples throbbed), hurriedly shot one stick of type after another into the galley. He thought he had missed out

a word; he checked it, re-read the text and found everything correct. He began putting type in the stick again, and again it seemed to him that he had missed some very important word. He spat, tied up the type in the galley, put it into the hand press and pulled the handle, so that the roller would run over the type and ink it. His hands were wet with sweat, his face was steaming.

"Let her go! " shouted Mishka, putting a sheet of wallpaper into the press (they had only wallpaper to print the manifesto on).

Ivan Pankratov saw a galley proof of his own setting for the first time in—how many years? But he had no time for reminiscences, for Mishka was shouting at him.

"Read the proofs, Uncle Ivan! "

He found a misprint, an "E" instead of an "I", and wanted to dig it out with a pick and change it, but suddenly he could not see the sharp end of the pick; the lever of the hand press disappeared from his sight, and first his fingers, then his arm retreated into the haze. He dropped the pick and grasping the lever of the press firmly looked round the shop. There was no shop any more. A dull reddish mist was his whole world.

"Put the paper in, Mishka," he said.

Mishka whistled, and told him to set the press going. Soon some soldiers came running to the printing works for the manifestoes and they handed them the lot—seventy copies—

forgetting to leave one for themselves. Half an hour later the Cossacks filled the trenches. Machine-guns were aimed into the desert. The *basmachi* retreated. And another five hours later the steamer reached the Amu Darya through the newly dug canal. The whole town greeted the steamer. People took Ivan Pankratov by the arms and led him out to meet it (why they were leading him and how he did not notice). The Cossacks roared a united and somewhat boastful "Hurrah! " at it. It was still raining and the tiny drops were falling on Ivan's face.

"See what a big ship it is?" someone asked him.

"Yes. I do," he answered, although before him there stretched an endless sea of fog with a tiny, gleaming circle in the middle—the sun.

1927

THE DINNER-SERVICE

The caretaker had scarcely appeared at the doors of the church, deliberately rattling his keys (to drive away his sleepiness), than Katerina Alekseyevna already stood by the church porch. It was the anniversary of some small church festival; the bell-ringer spent a long time choosing which bell to ring; and the priest, short-breathed, white-haired and deaf, was late: there was much the old woman was dissatisfied with and she crossed herself with sweeping, firm gestures, sure that everyone in the church understood and feared her displeasure. She was also sure that she stood stern and straight there in the church, all in black, but her wadded jacket, grubby and with carelessly sewn-on patches, hunched her back that was already stooped. Her flaccid

cheeks were covered with grey, dirty-coloured hair and her sharp nose looked swollen and somehow sweaty—all this because she rarely washed with soap.

Whenever she fell on her knees she always glanced round at Anfiska, the girl given the task of looking after her; the girl hurried over to help and her face took on the expression worn by everyone in the house—that is, of seeming to be afraid of Katerina Alekseyevna's wrath. In fact, Anfiska thought that the old woman was pretending, that she was not pious and went to church only because there was no other way she could thank the master and mistress for whom she had worked as a cook almost fifty years and who had given her a cubby-hole behind the kitchen, food and clothes for her lifetime and also Anfiska to assist her. Indeed, who would want to stand in a stuffy little church, smelling of stale incense and cheap wax, when outside it was August. Ripe, slightly yellow leaves, weary from a joyous life, were falling lazily from the trees and hanging on the iron teeth of fences; these leaves smell of fruit and fruit filled the markets.

An immense and sunny autumn was advancing on the town; both town and the birds in the sky throbbed and there was a great roar in the heart, too! But the old woman felt cold and wore several pairs of stockings, all of them wool, one on the top of

the other. Her slippers were also thick, backless carpet slippers, and when they went out of the church Anfiska always hurried the old woman, pulling her by the hand and screeching: "Come on, come on!" As soon as you stepped on to the porch you could see orchards and branches shining with sun and wind, but the old woman stumbled on the string mat and Anfiska always forgot to look at the old woman's feet and every time the old woman left her slippers behind and walked along the street in her stockings.

Outside the church Anfiska was in no mood for the old woman. There, deft and cheerful men with scarlet fingers sold plump late raspberries on the street corners; the customers looked on laughingly as the raspberries fell to the ground from their bags and lay just as juicy and joyful. Grapes shone blue on the stalls. The grapes no doubt hid their perfumes within themselves and Anfiska thought that her mouth would never know these perfumes and the small boys standing by the traders thought the same, although there were said to be occasions when a trader would give the boys a berry or two each. But Anfiska could not stand there, she had to take the old woman home—and Anfiska did not even envy the small boys, but was pleased with their luck, in which, incidentally, she had little belief. Today, just as she always did, the old woman, climbing up to the porch,

stopped by the door to wipe her feet in order not to leave foot-prints, although the day was dry and dusty—but there was no quarrelling with the old woman. The old woman grasped the door-handle—and then it was discovered that she had again forgotten her slippers on the mat in the church. Anfiska's fingers had always been set widely apart (as if other fingers, invisible to everyone, were between those fingers, which was, apparently, what Anfiska thought). Katerina Alekseyevna looked at these fingers, tensely stretched in different directions, and sad slowly: "Go." And Anfiska went, although she did not want to.

By now it was already quite damp in the church. The caretaker was roaming about, grumbling: he did not like children there and always thought that children went to church in order to steal candles (the caretaker was a shoemaker, the father of two daughters, but they had left him and gone on the streets for a gay life—and perhaps they had found it, only they did not tell their father). The apartment of Katerina Alekseyevna's master and mistress was empty—one of its inhabitants was at work, another had gone to keep an appointment and others were simply out enjoying the sunshine—and Katerina Alekseyevna, as she always did on such occasions, walked through the entire apartment before going into her cubby-hole. The door had been

opened to her by the cook, who was now rattling crockery in the kitchen. The cook was a strapping, broad-beamed woman who was quite unable to give birth to a child and her husband, who lived in the village, threatened that he would find himself another wife. The cook said that she had no children because of insufficient air and was constantly opening the fan-light to ventilate the apartment, but the master and mistress forbade this: they said that cold air passed from the kitchen into Katerina Alekseyevna's cubby-hole and she could catch cold. They said this not to show they were afraid that Katerina Alekseyevna would die, but because they did not like sick people who were, they thought, a constant source of infection. The master, Fyodor Sergeich, portly and with strands of hair combed over his bald spot, even hurried to be first to kiss ladies' hands in order not to be infected by the saliva left by those who had kissed the hand before him.

Katerina Alekseyevna thought that the cook wanted to get rid of her in order to take the cubby-hole for herself and therefore did not tell the cook of the method which, as she well knew, helped women to give birth. The cook realised this and for many years now they had intended to have a talk with one another and both lacked the will. The rooms were light and spacious, but for some reason they were papered in dark wallpaper with large,

unnatural flowers on the trieze and guests for some reason always praised and took pleasure in this darkness and these flowers, which were like wood shavings. The best and most cheerful feature of the apartment was the sideboard.

This sideboard had survived from the days when people were not ashamed (as they are now) of eating well and in large quantities while others go hungry. The sideboard had been made by people who ate a lot—and when Katerina Alekseyevna stopped opposite it an entire windowful of sun fell on the dark oak and on the carved leaves ornamenting the side doors; dark wooden grapes slipped over these doors and the grapes also shone in the sun and seemed to be translucent. The belly of the sideboard, sagging almost to the floor, was supported by cheerful children carved from oak, whose stomachs were firm and round, and on whose hard cheeks the fat they had preserved for whole centuries exulted. The shelf joining the two halves of the sideboard was thick, made of solid oak. A boat could have been made from this enormous block or a whole roast bullock, shall we, say, could have been laid on it. The smell of the meat would have filled the entire house: the host would have approached with a knife and the guests, looking with confident eyes at the bullock, would have moved their glasses closer... A forgotten sauce-boat of

French porcelain with pale roses that seemed to wilt stood on this board. The sauce-boat came from a dinner-service which was the pride of the entire family—of many families and of many of Katerina Alekseyevna's masters and mistresses.

Oh, that dinner-service! Katerina Alekseyevna had served it for half a century, more than that, for seventy-five years! She had first encountered it as a young village girl when the cook, grey-haired and kindly, had sternly taught her how carefully the dinner-service had to be washed, taught her with the same words that Katerina Alekseyevna now addressed to the girl Anfiska. Many wars, bank failures, even revolutions (during which Persian carpets and Oriental shawls, shining with white circles and their cashmere hearts, had disappeared from this apartment), much had passed by this dinner-service, and its pale flowers reminded its thin and drawn owners that there were rose bushes that flowered even in winter and do not lose their petals in cyclones! Such thoughts give many people pleasure—and the sideboard kept the pale meaningful roses in its stomach tenaciously and joyfully...

Katerina Alekseyevna wanted to put away the sauce-boat in the sideboard so that no one should jog it accidentally. She had already stretched out her hand and the cold smoothness was almost touching her skin—but

then she felt a slight and alarming pain in her side. This pain quickly passed and was replaced by a drowsy languor that also passed in a moment. But the anxiety remained and Katerina Alekseyevna, not daring to overcome it, went into her cubby-hole. The entrance to this cubby-hole passed from the sitting room into a small dark little passage, out of which one door opened into the kitchen and the other into Katerina Alekseyevna's room. The door was low, so that it was always necessary to stoop, and Katerina Alekseyevna always bent her head a step away from the door, but now she struck it and, most importantly, felt the pain only when she stopped by her bed. The pain did not surprise her, but she was astonished by her failure to understand where it came from and also by her disbelief that she had caused the pain by knocking herself against the door-jamb! She felt more and more sleepy and had the feeling, especially in her arms, that she had performed some very long and monotonous rather than tiring task. Her fingers seemed to be sticking together and her eyes had already long since become stuck together, although she continued to see clearly and distinctly. The window had been badly washed; marks from the water furrowed it and she wanted to open the window. She said this to Anfiska, who had entered the room.

The trees in the orchard were already bare,

for the orchard stood on a windy hill, and through the trunks the domes of a far-off monastery could be seen; they gleamed dully, like ripe fruit. When Anfiska turned from the window the old woman lay stretched out and her face was so stern that it was only now that Anfiska really felt frightened by it. The old woman's hands were folded tightly together; the ends of the fingers, coarse and thick, were wrinkled and dirty. The old woman said clearly and distinctly to Anfiska:

—Go and bring a pla ... but not from the kitchen, from the sideboard.

Katerina Alekseyevna wanted to speak and thought that she was speaking in a whisper, for she wanted to cry out either from joy or from grief, from some kind of unknown feeling which she had never before experienced. She compressed her lips, but they did not move. She saw that Anfiska was fussing and hurrying so ineptly that the fuss was only hampering her movements and when Anfiska appeared in the door with a plate in her hands and the window-sash cut across the pale rose Katerina Alekseyevna felt offended for the first time that she had been given a person to look after her who did not understand simple words and simple needs. Anfiska saw a kind of bold spite in the unmoving, purple face and this spite was so clear and so agonizing that Anfiska, although she knew that she would have to run and tell what had happened to

Katérina Alekseyevna in the kitchen, nevertheless lacked the strength to run and when the old woman said angrily:
—What have you brought? You should have brought two! Anfiska went for a second plate.
The old woman tried to raise herself and Anfiska slipped a pillow under her back, but this did not seem enough and she put the quilted jacket under her back as well and after that a pair of felt boots. Then the old woman, overcoming intolerable drowsiness and trying somehow to straighten a face which was twisted in a spasm and thinking that she would succeed in this, spread her slowly adhering hands and took a plate in each hand. And when she had taken these plates she clearly felt that she now had no one to fear, she waved her hands furiously and a gay and light boldness came over her and sleep blew like a dry wind on her eyes. She did not hear the plates strike each other and smash in her hands or feel her thumb press on a sharp piece of porcelain—she did not feel the edge. Her face was purple and a pallor began to pass slowly from the end of her nose to her cheeks. This white spot expanded and filled the entire face, but her body continued to stretch and stretch.
Anfiska stood by a stool beside the bed. She was not afraid to see this tense, purple face grow pale, but the incomprehensible thought

frightened her until she shuddered: why, oh why had the old woman smashed the plates? And only when she thought that others might conclude that the plates had been smashed not by the old woman but by her, Anfiska, did her heart become easier and the immobile face of the old woman seem terrible to her and at the same time dear, and she wept bitterly.

1927

SISYPHUS, SON OF AEOLUS*

The soldier knew them at once, his native mountains!

The mountains had always been like this at noon, a sombre jagged grey slashed with deep orange gorges. And he at once recognised the Scironian Road, winding down the steep southern flank of the mountains. It lay in coils, like a herdsman's whip. So had Poliander seen it as a boy, and so it had remained to this day. It was a road of evil repute, for the traveller might suddenly observe blood oozing forth from its surface, or other signs of misfortune.

But what were misfortunes to Poliander? He had drawn his full ration of them and

*English translation © Progress Publishers 1976

drunk the cup to the dregs. And now he was withered and yellow before his time, as if from some pernicious sickness.

He had sworn to serve Alexander, King of Macedonia, called the Great, and he had served him. Later he had served King Cassander, whose character had combined a ruthless irascibility with an even more ruthless ambition. It was King Cassander who had incarcerated the widow and son of the Great Alexander, to whom the gods of every land and the armies of every land had paid homage. But soldier Poliander continued to carry his silver-chased shield against the enemies of Cassander. Foolish man that he was, he wanted Cassander to think well of him! It is said that faith can move mountains. But King Cassander proved more immovable than the biggest mountain. Cassander distrusted Poliander, as he distrusted all soldiers; he feared his shield, his thick red neck and his stentorian voice, whose thunder other soldiers loved to hear. Before he was forty King Cassander had declared him a sick peltast, too weak to serve in the light infantry, and sent him home without even a bounty.

And now before him rose the mountains beyond which lay his homeland—the rich city of Corinth. The soldier looked at the mountains and wondered how he would be greeted in his native city and who among his kinsmen would be still alive. It was many

years since he had last set foot on his native soil. In those days he had been strong, but now his wounds had been declared dangerous and he had been released from King Cassander's army. A weakling!

"Who do my wounds endanger, by the dog and the goose? Maybe they endanger you, o King? Perhaps you fear my strong belief that the son of the Great One, the small and youthful Alexander Aegus, will be just as warlike as his father when he grows up? He will need me! He will need to campaign! But you, o King, have wit enough only to hold what was won by the Great Alexander. And will you hold even that, King Cassander?"

Such were the words he muttered as he gazed with apprehension at the Scironian Road. Indeed he was loath to climb it. He had known enough misfortunes as a soldier! Enough bad omens! He wanted to live the tranquil life of an honourable man, a dyer of good woolen cloth, for example.

And he remembered a path that had once been a short cut to Corinth. True, it was a difficult path, but it was not visited by bad omens.

"Hi, there! "

The peasants of a nearby village reaping their fields turned to look at him with respect. For relief from the heat he had discarded his armour, but his chest was so broad that he seemed to be still wearing it. He always kept

his elbows stuck out, both from the habit of holding shield and spear and because his armour never allowed them to lie close to his sides. He even slept on his back, his big sensuous mouth wide open. His eyes, like those of all men who have travelled much, expressed constant wonder, and their colour was that of mown grass which is just about to turn into hay but despite its dryish maturity still retains the hue and aroma of youth.

He stood in the picturesque and majestic pose befitting a soldier of Alexander the Great, who had marched from the borders of Thrace to the icy Nestos, where eternal winter reigns; who had seen the Caucasian Mountains, the farthest limit of the world, beyond which lies the Kingdom of Darkness; who had seen Memphis, Damascus and Susa, and all the rocky citadels of Iran, the banks of the Hydaspes and the marshlands of the Indus, where he had faced the charging elephants of King Porus of India with their narrow eyes and strong yellow tusks.

He wished the peasants good luck with their harvest, adding that Zeus and Athena would help them, and then asked for a drink of water. A girl of about fourteen with lively eyes and thick, crudely cut brown hair brought him a pitcher of tepid water. The scent of grain was wafted from the threshing floor. A mule stood snuffling and scratching its flank. An older woman with steep, well-fed

thighs betokening the proximity of rich Corinth, a city skilled in the arts of buying and selling, bent down and again began deftly cutting the thick, shining ears of wheat and putting them in her basket. The girl arranged them with their cut stalks to the south, on the hardened, black-violet earth of the threshing floor, where a light dust rose as the pack mules and oxen-dragon threshing carts with their heavy solid wheels came up to it.

Returning the pitcher, Poliander said, "By the dog and the goose I swear that the girls of Corinth are as hospitable and beautiful as ever! And that the craftsmen are still putting them on their vases and bronze and those columns they adorn with acanthus leaves."

The villagers smiled at his wise words and the girl who had brought him water stuck her finger in her mouth in wonder.

"I am hurrying to Corinth," he said. "I am tired of glory and wish to live a peaceful life. I have with me the true red juice from a purple shellfish that, I swear by the dog and the goose, I actually saw being caught. I have learned to dye cloth purple from the Phoenicians and have practised under the finest craftsmen of Tyre, Kosa and Tizent."

And he held out his sinewy fingers, the long hairs of which were dyed a blood red. The villagers started back in fright and an old man with a thick, bulging nose said to him,

"Did you ask about the Scironian Road? It lies before you."

Then soldier Poliander asked, "Is the Scironian Road safe?"

"It is safer than any other."

"In my time, " the soldier said quietly, "the travellers who were strong and in a hurry used to shorten the distance. They would take the path known as the Almian. No oxen or mules could climb it, but my feet remember that path well."

The peasants exchanged glances and the soldier read consternation on their faces.

"Has a cliff fallen on the path?" he asked. "Has some new precipice appeared? Or have the gods released a waterfall?"

The old man with the thick, bulging nose said, "It is an evil place."

"Robbers?" the soldier asked laughing, and showed the peasants his short javelin and his sword, which was straight and fine, its hilt studded with silver and ivory. "Ha-ha! Are there many of them? Ha-ha! "

The old man, scratching between his shoulder-blades with a crooked stick, repeated reluctantly, "It is an evil place. Take the Scironian Road. It will be better. No one has trodden the Almian path for years."

"Where do you see more omens?" the soldier asked resolutely.

"On the Scironian."

"Then who have I to fear?"

"The son of Aeolus," the old man replied, looking round fearfully.

The soldier roared with laughter.

"The son of Aeolus? The son of the god of the winds? What is he then? A breeze?"

"You will see," the old man replied, drawing back. The other peasants had already retreated, reluctant to discuss so dangerous a subject.

Soldier Poliander gave a deliberately loud laugh and picked up his helmet with its tattered horse-hair plume and roughly fashioned back and breast plates, joined by battered metal shoulder-pieces. Sadly he noted that the felt lining of his cuirass was moth-eaten. "And I was hoping to make a good sale of my armour in Corinth. I shall have to buy a piece of Greek felt to mend it... That won't be difficult, but Greek felt is of no value and my fine Persian stuff is ruined! Could this moth be a bad omen?"

Grumbling to himself, he heaved his sun-warmed accoutrements on to his shoulder and took the Almian path, swinging along with broad strides as if to hasten the approach of danger.

* * *

He clumped along on his cork-lined leather soles. The clank of his skilfully tied equipment rang out far and wide reminding him of his campaigns and of his comrades whom time

had swallowed as the bottomless depth swallows those who sail the seas.

Beyond the village he spotted a dried-up watercourse, concealed by bushes. A few goats were reaching up on their hind legs to nibble the leaves. The stream-bed was scattered with greyish-blue pebbles and from it there rose a menacing lifelessness in the form of barely visible wisps of vapour. Sand sprinkled down from the high banks with a sound like someone scraping soft wood with a knife. The soldier felt ill at ease. He stopped and stood staring at the goats until he began to feel hungry himself.

Then he took a flat loaf out of his bag and, nibbling it like the goats in order to prolong the pleasure and give himself time to consider the situation, he turned his gaze to the bare glittering crags which he was to climb. Maybe I ought to have taken the Scironian Road after all, he thought. But that will mean turning back. How can a soldier who has just boasted of scaling the rocky citadels of Iran turn back? It would be a disgrace for a soldier of the Great One!

And he recalled the Almian path that he had first climbed thirty years ago or more. He had been perched on his uncle's shoulders His uncle was young and strong and his long thick hair smelled of oil; his jerkin was damp, and now and then the little boy would timidly touch the sloping shoulder. Then the

uncle would look up with mock severity and push into the boy's hand a lump of flat bread that smelled of smoke and olive oil. No one had a bad word to say about the Almian path in those days, or about the ruthless son of Aeolus.

Why ruthless? Why should I think that? Who set that word upon him, a word of dire punishment and pain, enforcing obedience like a metal choke collar for a dog? Who, by the dog and the goose?

He stopped, put his accoutrements down on a stone and looked back impatiently.

He had already made a fair distance up the path. He recognised it, although it had become overgrown and only close scrutiny revealed any traces.

The village below had merged with its olive-trees and vineyards. The valley had acquired the colour of wild, unfashioned rock. At last his overpowering desire to get as high as possible was satisfied. He was alone among the eternal, undying, indestructible rocks. And all around there reigned an eternal everlasting stillness.

But not within him! He was assailed by a speedily growing premonition of evil, an evil that was as inescapable as it was unbearable.

Like a horse stamping its hooves in impatience, the soldier stamped his foot several times. In doing so he shifted the stone on which his weapons lay. The sword fell

with a clatter. He tied it to his belt, put away the rest of his weapons in his bag and made the bag fast on his back.

Now it was easier to proceed. He strode on, thinking that impatience, as the wise men rightly say, is much akin to recklessness. He should have gone by the Scironian Road! He could have joined some passing caravan and talked to the merchants about the methods he had used to dye the fine, flowing garments of the oriental rulers. The merchants would have stared at him in wonder and been glad to have such a valiant defender and fellow traveller, and in the evening they would have treated him to a big, well-fattened haunch of mutton. And, sitting by their fire in the darkness, he would have felt as much at ease as in a city square in the daytime.

Here, even in the daytime he felt alarmed, as though he were enclosed by the arc of night. Even the thought of his dyes gave him no comfort. "What kind of purple dyer are you?" he mused. On his way to Corinth he had grudgingly used a pinch of the precious purple, three packets of which he had bought with the last money he possessed. He had dissolved this pinch of powder and dyed a little fragment of cloth torn from the rectangular shoulder-piece that he wore on his left shoulder. The hair on his hands had turned a blood-red colour, but the cloth unexpectedly faded to a pumice grey. Had the

craftsmen of Tyre given him the wrong formula? Had he paid his drachmas for nothing?

In his mind's eye he saw the cellar with the purple soaking in its broad low vats, and the cheerful dyers with their sleek faces and pleasure-loving eyes. Near the door two slaves, swaying rhythmically from side to side, were kneading the fuller's earth with their feet and the mud squeaked and squelched between their toes... Yes, the dyers of Tyre had cheated him! There was deceit in that cellar, just as there had been deceit at the court of King Cassander, and everywhere else!

And here he was on his way to Corinth, a deceitful and unmerciful city of traders and seafarers, which was now so near, and yet so far! What awaited him in Corinth?

To keep his hopes alive and help himself overcome these strange apprehensions he quickened his pace. The arduous path, he felt, would bring oblivion in the end, and it was with joy that he surveyed a great rock shaped like a riven tree towering above him on a grey crag with a violet foot. He quickly skirted it.

* * *

Before him there lay a hollow wooded with oak-trees. Further down, where the oaks ended there was a scree, and below that green waters roared among the rocks, throwing up

splashes of white foam. The ash of the burning sun lay upon the oaks, the scree, and the rocks amid the green waters.

The path had disappeared altogether, swallowed up by the oaks.

The soldier entered their shade. They stood close to one another and their shade was dense, but still he felt ill at ease, as though he were at the bottom of a narrow and swampy ravine. From below came the ruthless hollow roar of the river. Above him the whole sky was blotted out by the motionless oak crowns and their lower trunks bristled with short, dry branches that caught at his cloak, sword, bag and flask.

Muttering hasty prayers to the gods, the soldier ran out of the oak grove and, hunching his shoulders because the bag was slipping off them and he had neither the time nor the desire to right it, he ran out on to the scree, beyond which he could see another crag.

He was no longer peering down in search of the path.

He jumped from rock to rock, slipping and falling. Stones came loose and hurtled down. He stuck a foot in the hole from which a stone had rolled, but the hole shifted and he leapt desperately away from it. His hands were scratched, his feet gashed. His soles, the soles that had marched to the Euphrates and beyond, that had stood up to the journey from the Euxian Sea to the extreme borders

of Thebes, came loose and he soon lost one altogether.

Sour, stinging sweat blurred his vision. Deprived of his usual powers of observation, he could see no further than ten javelin lengths ahead. He was able to move only thanks to habitual gift of a soldier whom the Great One had trained always to push ahead whatever the circumstances and whatever his strength, for virtue was the great and all-uniting aim of human existence and the will of the gods.

The sun, having enjoyed to the full the humility of the rocks, the screes and the oak-trees, and also the soldier's outstanding virtue and persistence, withdrew its grey and pitiless heat, which erodes strength as water erodes a wall, and sent down some soft, damp violet shadows. The soldier drank a gulp of water and, taking fresh heart, exclaimed, "By the dog and the goose I swear I'll find that vanished path! "

And at that moment he heard from behind the crag which he was just about to negotiate a sound that seemed very unusual for these mountainous parts. It was the whirr and swish of a discus being thrown. The soldier knew this sound well. He had been trained to throw the discus not only for sport, but also to give him greater confidence when hurling stones at the enemy.

He leaned against the rock and listened.

The sound grew, spread and suddenly, as though having broken through some barrier, disappeared.

A tantalising silence reigned over the crags. Now there was yet another mystery to be solved in this acidly corrosive stillness... The soldier felt like halloing, giving a great, brassy shout with a lot of other soldiers, just as they would have shouted for rhythm's sake when hauling a siege engine or charging in battle.

Plucking up his courage, he made his way round the crag and saw another scree, like so many others that he had crossed. At that moment a wind sprang up. He recalled the old man's words about the son of Aeolus and shuddered. The thought thundered in his ears like a huge trumpet. He sat down on the stones and gasped huskily for breath.

Then he skirted yet another crag and crossed yet another scree. He now approached the crags where the scree ended with apprehension, gripping his sword and evoking the gods, including Aeolus. He would peer round the crags cautiously, and once even sharpened his sword on a stone before doing so.

All at once the sound came again. But now it did not resemble the sound of a metal discus. It was more like the roar of sea waves as, having rested in the deep, they roll forward playing with the pebbles on the shore.

The sound came from somewhere above, although the sky was still cloudless. It grew with such speed and strength that the soldier jumped back from the crag. The sound passed over the crag and a few stones flew from the summit, just as the handle flies from the blade of a knife drawn in fury.

Soldier Poliander was afraid. But he was a soldier and he felt better when he had decided to confront the enemy. Staggering with fear, scarcely able to move his failing legs, he made his way round the crag.

There was no scree beyond it. It opened into a fair-sized valley, into which a merry little stream hurried, retreating from the mountains. Oaks and fruit-trees grew along its banks. Further on the stream dived sharply into a river, the sound of which could be heard faintly in the valley.

Alongside the stream, in the shade of the oak-trees, which here formed an avenue, Poliander beheld a road of a very strange shape that he had never seen before.This road, cut in the rock, which was the colour of wet cork, had but one lane and looked more like a groove or an endlessly long gallery. It began somewhere high up in the mountain and ended far below, on the edge of the valley, in a small bog that appeared to have been trampled by the hooves of an enormous horse.

Along this gallery, appearing and disappearing among the oaks, whose shadows

fell upon his broad, muscular back, a hairy, huge-shouldered giant girded with skins was rolling a black ball of stone, the height of three men, polished to the brightness of a seashore pebble. The giant breathed in long, heavy gasps. His belly, which bulged like a wine barrel, rose and fell against the stone. His toes dug into the stream-bed and Poliander observed in astonishment that they had made steps for themselves.

"By the dog and the goose! " he exclaimed to himself, marvelling at the giant. "Who can this mighty fellow be who rolls a stone with the force of a storm at sea?"

Meanwhile the giant having heard Poliander's approach, turned his huge head with its red moustache and beard and said with an effort, "Thank the gods, a traveller! I'm ver-r-ry glad! Pass into the hut. I'm ver-r-ry glad! Start a fire. Put on the beans. And mix the wine. Ver-r-ry glad! " he uttered the word "ver-r-ry" with an effort every time he placed his foot in the hole delved by his toes, and rolled the stone forward.

"Who are you, o miracle?" Poliander asked.

"I'll be back in a minute! " the giant replied, and, pushing on, bellowed over his shoulder, "I'm ver-r-ry glad! There's a well behind the hut. Go down into it, and to one side there's a pit. Ver-r-ry glad! There's some snow in that pit. Mix it into the wine. Oh, I'm ver-r-ry glad! "

And he looked round again at Poliander. Now the soldier was able to examine his face. It was wrinkled and old but full of that victorious plenitude of days that is seldom seen but indicated, above all, uncommon strength and a skilled and patient expenditure of that strength.

Poliander backed away to the hut. The giant went on rolling the stone and the stone spun fast as if on a spindle, rolling quickly uphill, growing ever smaller in size and greater in brilliance until it seemed that the giant was propelling a glowing orange-yellow ingot into the intensively blue sky.

Poliander entered the hut, fanned the oak embers under a large cauldron into fire, found the well at the back of the hut, and went down the cold wet steps into it.

Before he reached the water he espied two niches. In the first stood earthen pitchers of wine, while the second was packed to the brink with snow. Poliander nudged the nearest pitcher with his shoulder. It lurched heavily to one side and gave off a smell of wine.

"By the dog and the goose I swear I shall be in no hurry to part with this fellow! " Poliander exclaimed, thinking of the good-natured giant.

With some difficulty he carried the smallest pitcher of wine into the hut, and then attended to the snow where he found,

wrapped in healing herbs, the flesh of a wild goat. He put this meat in with the beans and, when mixing the wine with water and snow, added a few spices from the precious handful that he had brought with him from the East.

Scarcely had he mixed the wine when there came again that terrible sound of simultaneous whistling and whirring, like a metal discus being thrown by a giant. Poliander skipped out of the hut. The threshold was dappled with the quivering shadows of the oak boughs. Far below the ball of stone was hurtling away down its gallery and a light, rainbow-hued dust rose over this gallery along the stream. The stone ball rolled to its appointed spot and stuck in the bog, throwing grass-green mud on all sides.

The giant, looking up at the sun from under his big hand, came lumbering down the mountain. As he approached the hut he wiped his hands on the goatskins girding his loins and smiled awkwardly.

"Are you glad, traveller?" he asked in a husky bass. "I'm ver-r-ry glad! Ver-r-ry glad indeed. Where are you from? Where're you going?"

The hut suddenly felt cramped, and so did Poliander's heart. He replied in a stifled voice, "By the dog and the goose, is this not the path to Corinth?"

"To Corinth?" his host asked with an effort. "Ver-r-ry glad! To Corinth."

The giant brought water for his guest to wash with. He watched the soldier washing his feet and hands, and the giant's face, big and square as a table, furrowed with the deep wrinkles of peasant anxieties and labours, was filled with thought. He seemed to be wondering what Corinth was. And it struck the soldier that it might not be so easy to win good-natured understanding from this giant.

"To Corinth! I'm making for Corinth, my home town! " he ejaculated loudly, as though speaking to one who was deaf.

"To Corinth? Ver-r-ry glad! Sit down. Have something to eat."

They ate the beans in silence. Then the host with hands that were evidently impervious to heat picked the wild goat's meat out of the cauldron and placed it on a board. He sprinkled the meat liberally with salt and pointed to the wine.

"Salt? Ver-r-ry glad! We'll drink a lot." And he roared with laughter, holding his belly with both hands. Apparently he had difficulty in finding words and those that he did find gave him great pleasure. They went to his head like strong wine.

Both men cleaned their hands with rolled bits of bread and the host took the pitcher containing wine and snow. The aroma of spices delighted him and this, too, indicated that he had not seen a human being for a long time. The soldier ate the meat greedily,

crunching the bones with his big strong teeth, and pride that he, Poliander, should have been the first to break the giant's long solitude gave his heart renewed strength.

"And I'm glad," he exclaimed. "By the dog and the goose, I swear it! Let's enjoy ourselves! "

And he raised the wooden cup of wine. He had tasted the wines of Lesbos, and Naxos, and the splendid wine of Chios. He was no novice when it came to wine. But this was the best of all. And he expressed his pleasure in grand style.

"Ver-r-ry glad! " the giant boomed. "Ver-r-ry glad. Drink some more. Ver-r-ry glad! "

And he poured more wine from the pitcher.

He himself drank but little. It was pleasure enough for him to see a fellow creature. But the soldier wanted to tell the tale of all that he had gained in life and afterwards squandered.

"Is it long since a traveller passed by here?" he asked.

"Yes, a long time," his host replied giving a wide smile.

"And you, have you been here long?"

"Yes, a long time. Today's the last day! "

"The last day?" the soldier repeated. "Have you sold your hut, with its orchard and cornfield? Where is your buyer? Did you sell it for a good price?"

"Zeus be praised, he has released me," the giant said, and his deep-blue eyes that were the colour of the heavens shone with joy. "I'm very glad! This is the last day."

"Glory to Zeus," the soldier said in the customary tone. "But surely it wasn't Zeus who bought your hut, its orchard and cornfield?"

With much gesticulation to make the soldier understand his host said distinctly, "Zeus put me here and Zeus has freed me."

"But what about the priests?" the soldier rejoined, sipping his wine. "They want to build a temple here, do they? It's a beautiful spot."

"Not the priests—Zeus! " his host repeated insistently. "It was Zeus who put me here! Zeus himself! "

"Zeus? Then who might you be for Zeus himself to put you here?" the soldier asked rather scornfully.

"I am Sisyphus, the son of Aeolus."

The soldier blinked and the wine flowed over his cold knees.

"By the dog and the goose! " the soldier stammered, "You—Sisyphus! "

The host nodded his shaggy head, sipping wine from his cup, and the soldier asked, "I have heard of Sisyphus, son of Aeolus, god of the winds. I know that he once ruled Corinth, and it was long ago, long before the time of Homer."

"That was I," his host replied with such majestic simplicity that the soldier let his cup fall from his hand and the thick oaken beams supporting the roof of the hut swam before his eyes.

"You, by the dog and the goose! "

"I, Sisyphus" his host replied, and again sipped from his cup. "Drink! "

The soldier could drink no more and his host was obliged to offer an explanation, difficult though it was for him to do so.

"I had sinned much. I had murdered the innocent. I had robbed. And Zeus punished me. I must forever roll a stone up the mountain. When it reaches the summit some unknown force throws it down again. You have seen it. But today you have seen the last day. I have been obedient. Zeus appeared unto me yesterday and said: 'This is the last day.' And I'm ver-r-ry glad! "

The giant laughed.

A sudden thought made the soldier shudder and he asked, "Tell me, o esteemed Sisyphus, son of Aeolus. You must have been punished when you reached the kingdom of the dead, the kingdom of Hades. Is that where I am?"

Sisyphus answered, "For countless days I rolled the stone up a mountain in the underground kingdom of Hades. I repeat that I was obedient and did not anger the gods with grumbling. Zeus's pardon lies in my having worked my way without noticing it

from the subterranean regions to this land of sunlight. That is why I am glad to see you, o traveller! "

The soldier asked, "Tell, me, o Sisyphus, son of Aeolus, what is the subterranean kingdom of Hades like? You have the gift of expressing your thoughts with such power and brevity."

Sisyphus answered, "Slush. Rain. Damp. Always."

"By the dog and the goose," the soldier exclaimed, "there could be no stronger expression of gratitude to the gods for sun and wine! "

"Drink," said Sisyphus, laughing. "I'm ver-r-ry glad! "

"Praise be to the wise Zeus," the soldier declared, his cup full of the misty red wine. "And have you been here long, all alone, at the summit of the mountains?"

His host replied, "Yes, for long. I rolled the stone from dawn till dusk. I was obedient."

"And after sunset you tilled your land, trapped animals and gathered fruit." His host nodded and the soldier went on enumerating the hardships of his life. "It was hard in the heat. And even harder in the rain, when winter was approaching. The water must have been a hindrance..."

"Floods of it! " his host cried. "A river flowed against me! Up to my chest! The stone was submerged in the water. My

hands slipped. Everything was wet. I had to fight against the current... But I am obedient to the gods. And Zeus has pardoned me."

"Praise be to the wise Zeus," the soldier said. "I beg you, pour me some more wine. This is wonderful wine. The last time I drank anything like it was in Iran."

"Were you a prisoner?"

"I a prisoner? Of the vile and cowardly Persians?" the soldier exclaimed with scorn. "Do you not know that Alexander the Great marched through Persia from beginning to end?"

"I know nothing," Sisyphus replied. "I was rolling the stone. Who is Alexander?"

"Ye gods! " Poliander exclaimed. "He does not know who Alexander is, the King of Macedonia! You know nothing of the battles he won, of how he conquered King Darius and ravaged the Indian kingdom of Porus, or how he wedded the beautiful princess Roxana, or of the numerous other treasures he gained?"

"I know nothing," Sisyphus replied. "The stone was heavy and it was difficult for me to look round."

"By the dog and the goose," the soldier cried, "I will tell you the whole story from beginning to end! Pour me more wine."

His host filled the cup again and the soldier began his tale.

* * *

Night had fallen. The stars were peeping through the branches of the oak-trees. The branches were still, as were the mountains beyond them, and the murmur of the stream was barely audible in the hut. Sisyphus sat with his great arms locked round his knees and the bronze-red light of the fire shone upon his face, making his eyes even bluer than before.

The soldier described the cities of the East. These cities were built of sun-baked bricks bonded with black and sticky tar that was the original and natural product of the Babylonian soil. He spoke of the oases with their tall palm-trees which lavish as many benefits from their trunks, branches, leaves, juice and fruit as there are days in the year. He spoke of the rafts floating on inflated skins that ply the full-flowing rivers with their high dams and carry all the wonderful gifts of the earth— horses, spices and women. Such were Persia, Egypt and India...

"And what has happened to them?" his host inquired.

The soldier rose and lifted his cup of wine.

"Praise be to the gods! " he exclaimed. "We crossed the Hellespont and made a sacrifice to our ancestor Achilles on the ruins of Ilium, of which you have surely heard. Then we marched to the River Granicus,

where we defeated the Persians. Then we marched through their country, burning the cities, destroying the dams and cutting down the oases. The roads along which we passed were paved with whole groves of palm-trees. We destroyed and burned everything! And then we reached the torrid zone where no man can set foot."

And inflamed with his story and the wine, Poliander went on wildly, "In this empty space we met only satyrs with purple horns and golden cloven hoofs. Their heads are shaggy, their noses flattened and there are wens in their cheeks, for they devote themselves to nothing but love, music and wine. We used to kill them. And we also killed the sirens. These passionate creatures with their alluring glances sit in flowery meadows and around them lie the bones of men who have died for love of them. We killed the centaurs and the pygmies, Indian and Ethiopian. With my sword alone—you see it here, Sisyphus—I destroyed a whole phalanx of pygmies, their cavalry. Every spring they ride out on goats and sheep in battle order to look for cranes' eggs... Ha-ha-ha! "

"Ver-r-ry glad! " his host cried, raising his cup. And his heavy voice was echoed with a roar by the brooding, invisible mountains.

The soldier continued.

"We ravaged and burned all this in the

name of Achilles and to the glory of his descendant Alexander, King of Macedonia! And this made Corinth rich! It also made King Cassander rich, Cassander who has acted so ignobly towards me..."

The soldier lurched forward with anger, drunkenness and the thought that had just struck him. For a moment he stared at the giant sitting motionless by the fire, then he said, "Sisyphus, son of Aeolus! Are you the King of Corinth?"

"I was the King of Corinth," Sisyphus answered.

"And you shall be King of Corinth again! " the soldier cried. "You shall be King of all Greece. You will destroy the greedy, ignoble King Cassander with his everlasting lust for gain. And you will be king in his stead! "

The soldier had meant to say that it would be the under-age son of Alexander who would reign. But how could he say it? Sisyphus's eyes were gleaming, he would clearly like the crown himself, and who could tell whether he would take the little Alexander Aegus on his shoulders.

To bend Sisyphus finally to his will, the soldier cried, "You will don the purple and become king! Do you know... Do you know, o Sisyphus, that I have been sent to you by the gods?"

"Ver-r-ry glad! "

"And you will leave this place and go with

me, do you know that?"

"Ver-r-ry glad! "

"We shall ravage, kill, rape and amass treasures! .."

"Ver-r-ry glad! " his host boomed. And the mountains boomed their echo from beyond the oaks in the depths of the ultramarine night.

His host laughed and swayed from side to side with delight. The firelight played on his burly shoulders, on his knees that were as round as haystacks. The soldier ranted on, shouting and lying. There was nothing more beautiful than a burning city... But a burning city was also a terrible place to be. The Persians and Indians would be sniping from every corner, the treasures were destroyed by the flames, the pungent smoke and fumes stung your eyes, the young women threw themselves into the fire and the only captives were the old ones, whom it was unpleasant to kill because their bones and sinews were so tough they blunted your sword. In the end he himself became disillusioned with his own prevarications and, as he stared at the purple flame in the hearth, he remembered the purple in which he had promised to dress Sisyphus.

He said, "The goatskins in which you are clad, o Sisyphus, are of dirty brownish colour. Give them to me..."

"What for?" Sisyphus asked.

"Let me have them for a minute and I'll turn them into purple at once! "

He found another cauldron, filled it with water, quickly got it boiling and sprinkled all his purple dye powders into it. The water seethed purple. Poliander dipped the long wool of the skins, trying not to wet the skins themselves, then he hung them up on sticks near the fire. He stood back admiring the scarlet-tinted wool and dreamed of noisy Corinth acclaiming King Sisyphus, and of Cassander's head lying at his feet, and of himself, Poliander, the commander-in-chief, standing beside Sisyphus.

"We're on our way, o Sisyphus! On our way to glory! " he cried. "What is this miserable valley to you? You never slept properly because your nights were spent tilling the soil, weeding and watering, catching fish in your nets and wild beasts in your snares. You shall sleep on the softest down, lulled by the songs of beautiful maidens, and you shall sleep long, all morning until noon."

"I'll be ver-r-ry glad ... to sleep..." Sisyphus boomed, and his firm straight mouth opened in a yawn. "Ver-r-ry glad..."

"You shall be the King of Greece and I shall rule with you..." And with these words soldier Poliander lay down on the bed and, as was his custom, put his breast-plate and back-plate under his head, and covered his legs with his oval shield so that the hooks and

buckles of the fastenings were on top. At his side he laid his short Argos sword and, having done all this, promptly fell asleep.

* * *

He was awakened by the roar of battle. As always he felt a cold, shivering fear that began in the long bones of the foot and spread to the ankle. But, as behooved a soldier of the Great One, he swiftly overcame his fear and sprang up, holding his sword at the ready.

It was early morning. The sounds of the battle died away. The soldier made for a narrow crack of light, screwing up his eyes. The door opened to his touch.

And from the threshold of the hut Poliander saw the yellow-red dawn rising over the scarlet mountains and at the bottom of the valley, bathed in the morning light, a huge black basalt ball was rolling up its groove in the mountain.

And Sisyphus was rolling it.

Then Poliander exclaimed in a voice trembling with astonishment and the after-effects of drinking, "By the dog and the goose I swear, I cannot believe my eyes! Is it you, Sisyphus?! Has not the wise Zeus pardoned you? Did you not agree to come with me to Corinth, and from there, wherever fate should lead us?"

And then Sisyphus replied, still pushing the stone with his shoulder, "My thighs, shins and

the soles of my feet are old. The young generation of Greeks marches too fast. I might lag behind and then I should be left to wither somewhere in the East, in the hot sands of the desert... But here... I'm used to it here. I have my beans, my snares for the wild goat, my wine once in a while, and cheese to go with it. What more do I need? I'm used to it. Go to your Corinth, traveller, and I shall go to my mountain."

And he rolled the stone forward, straining heavily against it.

* * *

And before he disappeared from the soldier's view Sisyphus grunted to himself, "I'm ver-r-ry glad to push useless stones against the wind, it is better than to sow swift-sprouting evil..."

He was not accustomed to speaking in such long sentences and so he said it indistinctly. The soldier did not hear his words and, even if he had heard them, it is doubtful if he would have understood.

The burly and powerful Sisyphus became a lean, spare figure as he trudged away, and his stone again turned into a glowing ingot. They both quickly approached the summit of the mountain, whence an invisible force was to hurl the stone back again. The soldier had no wish to hear the stone's horrible whirring and screaming flight and, hurriedly grabbing his

accoutrements, he ran to the path, which now stood out clearly before him.

As he strode along the path, he was aware of a painful stabbing in the heart. He had a premonition that Corinth would not welcome him as a kinsman, that his reception would be much cooler than of old. Perhaps it would be better not to go there at all. But where else was his homeland? He was an arrow shot from the bow and there was no fair wind to carry him elsewhere. Who would dye rags and tatters in purple?

And again he looked round at Sisyphus.

Sisyphus was high up now, on the sharp peak of a crag. His goatskins which Poliander had foolishly dyed the night before gleamed purple on his loins. Poliander had wasted the last of his precious purple... And with a burning anguish in his voice he declared, "I swear by the dog and the goose, o Sisyphus! It was not for nothing that Homer called you selfish, wrong-headed and deceitful! O treacherous son of Aeolus, you have deceived me! Is this a sign that I am destined always to be deceived?.."

1944

THE FALCON

By the front of the bark, close to the prow, tsar's falcons sat on perches, blown by a warm westerly wind. The governor Odudovsky, who was sailing to Astrakhan, was under orders to send them further, to the shah of Persia as a gift. Falconers kept constant watch by the birds and a little way off, by the side, a *strelets* from the tsar's guard in a vividly green kaftan stood proudly. Occasionally he went out to the front of the bark—decking rigged over the side, from where the crew raised and lowered the anchor—and then he saw in the faded waves an orange river-maiden with a twisted tail painted on the "cheek-bones" of the vessel, the white carving on the side, the square and low sail, the weather-cock on the

mast, the long scarlet ribbon beneath it and the Archangel Michael above, cut from sheet copper, trumpeting prosperity and happiness to travellers.

The hold of the tsar's bark was tightly packed with bales of furs, which were to be exchanged with Persian merchants for large-grain crumbly rice, for sweet and odorous dried fruit, for fine, brightly coloured silks and for rare, tamed animals, so dear to the heart of Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich. As well as furs, cannon-balls and gun-powder for the Astrakhan garrison lay in the hold. There was also the abundant provender for the town governor, for he was not sailing alone but with his wife and two daughters, whom he had shown to Moscow in the hope of finding them husbands. Husbands had not been found, the governor's lady was angry, the young ladies were as captious as little children, but none of this affected the cheerful, wise governor. Burly, laughing, rubicund, in a long, white shirt of Indian silk and azure blue satin trousers he walked about the vessel and amused everyone.

The governor also tried to amuse the foreigners whom the sovereign had commanded to be conveyed to Persia, since from there they intended to travel homewards to fanciful and learned Florence. The foreigners were a little frightened. The route home along the Volga, through Persia or Turkey was long and

uncertain, but there was nothing to be done about it. Other routes—this was 1664—were even more uncertain. Through Poland? The roads leading there were jammed with Russian troops, Poland itself was aflame with internal disorders, the Russians were besieging Glukhov, Hetman Teterya was roaming the steppes and no one knew with whom he wanted to ally himself—the tsar of Muscovy or the Polish republic. Through the North? Out of the question. There was unrest in Sweden.

There were six foreign passengers aboard. Senior among them was Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto, his right hand was called Malprosta and the others were his assistants or his servants. The foreigners had been working gilded leather and making furniture in Moscow and, after earning enough furs and coins, had become homesick. Monsieur Andzoletto was especially homesick.

Monsieur Philippe was bent and had red, inflamed eyes, which made him seem excessively old and greedy. Malprosta was tall and slim; his shabby, scarlet kaftan sat well on him, his soft hands were white and he was proud of them, trying to touch everything that came under his eye. He was bold and adroit in conversation, in hunting and in seduction—and women loved to be seduced by him. For this reason Monsieur Philippe considered him cunning and two-faced,

continuing to employ him only because of his superb craftsmanship. Philippe Andzoletto's back had been bent by unending, sleepless toil, which had also spoiled his sight; how, one might have been thought, could he not value a person with such incomparable skill in making gilded leather and valuable carved furniture. But how could you value him if you had a young wife and your heart was young?

August had proved dry and harsh. The wind blew upriver sharply and steadily, straight at the prow of the ship, as if it were demanding something. The vessel moved sluggishly against the ponderous, ash-grey waves. The river became shallow and there were many shoals. Peasants pulled on a tow-rope in vain and horses were harnessed. The horses pulled until piles of sand which the peasants scraped away with spades formed before the prow of the bark. Then the foreigners went to the bow to wait for the bark to move.

They looked sadly at the ash-grey heaps of wet sand, melting slowly in the water. The road home seemed especially long now. Governor Odudovsky, aware of their feeling of depression, approached them.

"Won't you have something to eat or drink, good people?" he asked heartily. "Home-brewed beer or mead? And I shall drink with you! "

Monsieur Philippe excused himself, saying that he did not feel well, but Malprosta always agreed. A table was laid and a servant poured home-brewed beer into goblets. The governor raised his goblet to the health of the guests and said, pointing at the tsar's falcons:

"Good hunters, eh? When you arrive in Persia, the shah will show these birds in action. I would show you them, too, but I was ordered to keep them quiet on their perches."

"The Persians are robbers and deceivers," Andzoletto objected. "They will plunder and kill us—there will be no question even of seeing falcon hunts, signor governor."

"I, however, think that the signor governor is right, my dear teacher," Malprosta said. "The Persians respect art and similarly people of art. We shall make a beautiful saddle upholstered with gilded leather for the shah and he will show us his falcon hunt. And he will order us to be conducted by peaceful roads right to our native sea! "

A look of such boredom appeared on Monsieur Philippe's face that governor Odudovsky felt strange and, taking his goblet, he walked away towards the falcons. He raised his goblet slightly, as if drinking the health of these splendid tsar's birds, and turned from them to the foreigners:

"It is a pity that you despise hunting, Monsieur Philippe. You would have been glad

and rejoiced in your soul as you looked at these gerfalcons. See how satiny white they are! They seem to emit light from within themselves, to the glory of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. These gerfalcons are bred in the north of our country and nowhere else, Monsieur Philippe! Look at this one, the third from the end, in the blue hood. He is entirely the colour of white bone and even in our country, in Russia, he is considered a rarity."

"Glory, glory to the sovereign who has bred such a falcon! " Malprosta exclaimed. "Ah, if I had this bird I would be as proud of it as of an archangel! "

"Fie! Fie! Malprosta, you should be proud of virtues, not of a bird," Monsieur Philippe said, his red eyes flashing. "Honour the rank of a person, not the rank of a bird."

"I honour above everything the rank of a beautiful woman who has given me love, then the rank of a king for whom I make furniture and who pays me punctually and then the rank of a bird like this gerfalcon! " Malprosta exclaimed.

But Monsieur Philippe was whispering prayers. He did not wish to listen to godless speeches that affected his spirit, already touched by secret designs. As he looked at the waves he confusedly transferred his red, inflamed gaze to the sands along the bank.

But even the sands—may the Lord forgive our sins! —even the sands lay in waves, reminding him of the charms of his young wife. "We shall all have to stand before the judgement seat..." he mumbled and did not find the strength to finish the prayer. He was drawn—it was shameful to say it! —towards Malprosta. He wanted to learn the thoughts of his assistant, above all those which related to his young wife and to her stirring charms... "We shall all have to stand before the judgement seat..."

Shuddering, the bark grated over the sand. In the hold below something fell. The falcons on the perch fluttered their wings. Beer spattered from the governor's goblet. That meant that they had again emerged into clear, deep water, into a reach.

"Do you see the precipice?" the governor asked.

"Yes, yes, we do," Malprosta responded.

"Where the precipice ends the village of Prince Podzolyev begins. The prince is wealthy! Plenty of mead and sweet liqueur, too. Hospitable, although a little mad. But no doubt tedium and weariness would make you glad to see a little madness of any kind?"

The table was cleared. The vessel was made ready for landing and the governor went to change. The foreigners were left by themselves.

They sailed by the high, bright-orange

precipice. The precipice was entirely covered in dots—burrows. On the top of it was a cemetery with dreary crosses and a roughly built church. That meant that they would, indeed, soon reach the village. They had encountered many villages and Monsieur Philippe was used to them. Neither wealth nor lordly eccentricity surprised him; he had seen both the painted mansions of princes imitating the palace at Kolomenskoye and the poor huts of the peasants. What did princely eccentricity mean to him? He wanted to go home, to Florence.

Had he not earned that time when he could live without leaving the splendid banks of the Arno? In Florence, not far from the main bridge, a certain Cappiccio was selling a hotel. This house had many guests, since it stood in the centre of the town. He had had enough of gilding leather, he wanted to gild his own heart! He would transfer the leather and furniture workshop to Malprosta and thus free himself of his foxy glance, which was becoming quite unbearable when the latter looked at the young wife of the master. Monsieur Philippe did not admit of the thought that his wife could be unfaithful, but he knew what his years meant. To marry at his age was no more or less than to call upon the devil at midnight. Pooh, pooh! .. Monsieur Philippe imperceptibly crossed himself and promised to add a beaver fur for

the prior to those furs he was bringing as a gift to a monastery...

"Dear teacher, do you know the oddity of Prince Podzolyev, at which the governor has hinted?"

"The oddities of Muscovy are no longer of interest to us," said stern Monsieur Philippe. "It is time, perhaps, for us to think about those of Persia."

"Oh, not at all, Monsieur Philippe! Only a fat, overweening town governor is capable of calling love an oddity. Love is life! Life is love. That is what the whole world thinks, the Russians included."

As they walked about the deck they stopped by the perches where the falcons were sitting with jess in their claws and hoods of soft leather covering their eyes, so that they should not see their prey until the very moment of "launching". Malprosta, admiring the leather of the hood, which rose and fell by the opening cut to allow breathing, said:

"Have you read the book the *Decameron* by a certain Florentine, Boccaccio, signor teacher?"

"A foolish and empty book," Monsieur Philippe answered dryly. "Boccaccio wrote it soon after the plague—may the Lord free us from it in the future! —that raged in our great city. He should have written a humble book pleasing to God, but he behaved

shamefully. His entire *Decameron* tells of how wives flee their obligations as a hare flees hounds, while monks ... pooh, pooh! However, as a just person, Malprosta, I shall give him his due. Boccaccio repented and later wrote *Corbaccio*, a book filled with an almost ascetic hatred for women. May his sins be forgiven and his soul be peacefully received into heaven! "

"Signor teacher! Ascetic virtues are impossible to fulfil. A person has a right to love..."

Monsieur Philippe flew into a fury.

"Who said that stupid thing to you?"

"Stupid? It is the truth, signor teacher! It is everywhere in the air. Even here, in these wild forests that give birth to gerfalcons, in this Muscovy greedy for money and honours. And in proof I shall tell you about Prince Podzolyev, the story of whose love I learned by chance. But first of all I beg you, teacher, to go back to the book of the worthy poet Boccaccio, to the *Decameron*. Do you remember, Monsieur Philippe, the story of the falcon?"

Monsieur Philippe said that, rather than remember indecencies, it would be better for him to cut off his hand. Malprosta exclaimed:

"The story is not indecent at all, signor! It is an elevated example of love, told with the same mastery with which we make our dear armchairs and gild our expensive leathers.

Signor Boccaccio tells of a certain cavalier who paid suit long and fruitlessly to a beautiful lady. From love for her he spent his entire estate and became poor. But he continued to sigh and weep for her. And of all that had once belonged to him he was left with only a falcon, by means of which, I think, the cavalier even gained his food. He loved this falcon beyond measure. So immoderately that the lady, insofar as I understand ladies' hearts, the lady was jealous of this love. Once the cavalier visited the lady. As he always did, he began to talk to her about love. Laughing, she said: 'Cavalier! If you wish to prove to me your love, kill your falcon and—eat it! ' And what do you think, signor teacher? The cavalier killed his beloved bird. He roasted it! And he ate his falcon, oh great God! But what was more surprising, the lady, until then adamant, fell in love with the cavalier."

Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto said that the cavalier's act could be regarded in different ways, but that his consistency was not to be denied. However, Boccaccio's book was immoral. And Monsieur Philippe looked at the river bank with disapproval, compressing his lips and raising his head with an effort.

The bark had pulled in to the shore. The sail fell noisily and a flock of rooks rose from a nearby threshing-floor. The sailors threw down the gang-plank, which creaked

plaintively. An emissary of the prince came on board, bowed to the governor and said that, after mass, Prince Podzolyev would come to the ship to invite the governor and his guests to partake of his hospitality.

On the bank, wearing torn pants of sacking, his palms turned out and his bare feet with large toes wide apart, stood an enormous grey-haired peasant, one of the prince's serfs. Scowling, he looked intently at the boat, the foreigners, the tsar's falcons and the king's *strelets* in his green kaftan. He gazed with childishly unreasoning and apprehensive eyes: these thin-legged foreign devils just might put the evil eye on him, they just might bring misfortune with them. It would be better to go away, but he did not want to go away. The peasant was talkative and thought that the world would be a barren place without his stories.

Monsieur Philippe looked at the bank and the giant grey-haired peasant and dreamed of Florence, the bridge over the Arno and the hotel owned by a certain Cappiccio. The braying of donkeys on the bridge could be heard from its narrow balcony and the faces of drovers and their switches could be seen, but even more clearly to be seen now was the firm body of his young wife and the way she was swirling her skirt to and fro... Oh, what childish, what bitter grief was in his heart and how far off Florence still was!

"Do you want to hear how the story of the falcon goes on, Monsieur Philippe?"

Oh, this Malprosta! All he has to do is admire women and chatter about falcons. He has become plump, hale and hearty on strong Muscovy bread and cheap meat, curse him! Monsieur Philippe thought.

"How does it go on?"

"It is a remarkable story, signor teacher." And Malprosta continued: "Its sequel occurred three hundred years after the book the *Decameron* by the renowned Signor Boccaccio appeared. From this I deduce that art is immortal more than any noble family."

"When you become a nobleman, Malprosta—may God assist you in this! —you will think differently."

"Who knows ... but let us return to Prince Podzolyev, teacher. There is his mansion. It is a great and large house. The whole estate of the prince is great and large. He is proud in age, but it is said that he was still more proud in youth. He was proud of his mind and his hunting and was quick to express his pride. Moreover, while his father greatly increased their wealth he had no sisters or brothers and when the old prince died Signor Yury Podzolyev was the only heir. He did not know what to do with his countless estates and enormous wealth. Imagine, signor teacher, a roof without rafters, without those very beams which always and everywhere serve as

the foundation of a roof."

"God is the foundation of the roof of our life, just as he is the foundation of the entire house," Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto said, crossing himself and trying at the same time to drive away the memory of the sign of the cross which his young wife so lightly and prettily made.

"But after all, you yourself, signor teacher, say that the schismatics have turned away from the true God? Consequently, Prince Podzolyev was doubly deprived of rafters. But the prince was bold, he was persistent in his quest—and then he met the widow of boyar Mysharikov, a very rich and very dignified woman, who had devoted herself to charitable and religious affairs since the death of her husband, especially since she had no children. He would throw his money at her feet! As you know, Monsieur Philippe, to marry a widow is considered shameful among the Russians. But passion had so swallowed up Prince Podzolyev that he wanted only to commit this shameful act. The widow had little faith in his love. The past had shaken her, like a bad road. The prince was rarely able to speak with her. She did not accept presents. Prince Podzolyev grew thin from love, shut himself up in his mansion... And his great wealth proved unnecessary."

"Love takes uncouth forms among the barbarians," Monsieur Philippe said.

"Oh, signor teacher!" Malprosta exclaimed. "I am telling you of a case that proves love is identical both in a warm and in a hot climate, on the banks of the Arno and here on the banks of the Oka. Prince Podzolyev was dying from love. Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich of Muscovy, as you know, Monsieur Philippe, is very curious about the life of his subjects and was quick to learn of Prince Podzolyev's withdrawal into seclusion, although he did not know the reasons for this. The tsar is sure that all ills can be cured by hunting—and especially hunting with falcons. Moreover, the tsar had respected the merits of the late Podzolyev senior. And the tsar presented the young prince with his favourite gerfalcon. A very rare white gerfalcon, signor teacher! When the young prince received the present he thought it incumbent upon him to show it to the beautiful and inaccessible widow, especially as the widow would then have to receive the young prince. Who would refuse to see a gift from the tsar? The widow did indeed receive the young prince. She looked at the gerfalcon, shifted her gaze to the young hunter and said suddenly: "Kill, roast and eat this gerfalcon. Then I shall marry you."

Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto said:

"The devil came on them from one side, Malprosta, and they did not notice him. We shall pray for their sinful souls."

To this Malprosta replied:

"I should like to have the life of that devil, signor teacher! Prince Yury Podzolyev, may his name be blessed, ate the gerfalcon. And she married him. And they were so happy that the tsar, when he learned of the prince's deed, only roared with laughter. And fifteen joyful years passed and they are both alive and happy still, signor teacher! And you say—the devil! "

Monsieur Philippe did not argue, the more so as such a passionate, zealous peal of bells was carried over the village, the mansion and the river that the soul of the master-craftsman of gilded leather lightened. A crowd appeared. In front walked the tall, round-shouldered Prince Yury Podzolyev. His clothes were modest but costly: a sand-coloured, single-breasted kaftan with a gold thread.

His heels ringing energetically, he walked up the gang-plank to the deck and bowed in a dignified way to the governor. The governor was flattered by the swift appearance of the prince. The table was laid. But before sitting down to the meal, the prince asked to be shown the tsar's gifts, which the boyar Odudovsky was taking to the shah of Persia.

Because of Malprosta's story Monsieur Philippe examined Prince Yury Podzolyev with especial attention. The prince was thin and tall, like a ladder. He had an unhealthy, ashen face. His broad, bony shoulders pointed,

on the one hand, to past strength and, on the other, to some chronic wasting disease.

Lowering fine lids to half-cover his pumice-coloured, dry eyes, the prince examined the tsar's gifts as if unwillingly, took food unwillingly, replied to the governor unwillingly and only occasionally glanced sharply at the foreigners—and this glance was a strange one. He even asked questions as if he himself were giving answers.

The foreigners sat at a separate table. Malprosta, who was generally distinguished by an insatiable appetite for food, now ate little. He gazed unblinkingly at the prince with his protruberant eyes as if expecting something unusual from him.

After eating the prince rose and repeated his invitation, sent that morning through his retainer, to partake of his hospitality and, if the guests would do him the favour, to inspect his estate. And he walked up to the foreigners. Would not the foreign guests sacrifice a part of their time to visit his home and sit at his table? he asked them, inclining his head slightly. And again his gaze seemed strangely questioning to the foreigners. As he caught this gaze Malprosta said to himself: "I shall ask!" And what he wanted to ask was whether it was true what people said, that in his youth Prince Yury had eaten his best falcon for the sake of love?

While Monsieur Philippe was twitching his

toothless mouth with surprise, groping for words, Malprosta fawningly expressed to the prince his liveliest pleasure and joy. They had heard so much about his wealth and especially about the prince's falcon hunt, they were so eager to see it. At these words the prince, after again looking searchingly at the foreigners, departed.

The prince's village, the mansion, the church and the service—all were striking in their richness, magnificence and scale. The man seemed to have sacrificed his life and honour to amaze, to stagger others, to take their breath away! Pitch-brown, age-old and strong the massive huts stood. The murmuring of well-fed cattle carried from roofed-over yards. There was a smell of milk and cattle-sheds; a dense, sleepy-purple fire could be seen in the stoves; women with faces the colour of blackberries ran out on to the porch from the stoves. They bowed low to the people passing by.

The exterior of the church was painted with flowers, while inside the entire Bible story was told in instructive and agreeable pictures. On the right, by the choir, was the place where the prince stood. There, on the wall, a thin, tall old man with a proud gaze in an orange-red chasuble was descending into a ship. The inscription was: "Jonah descending into the hold of a ship". The foreigners could not read this inscription—both because they

had been left on the church-porch and because they did not comprehend the Church-Slavonic language. Incidentally, had they read it they would hardly have understood its meaning. Only intelligent governor Odudovsky correctly deciphered this inscription. He looked at Jonah's stern gaze and then said to the prince:

"If it is one's lot to accept without complaint, then one should accept. For if Jonah cried out below, from the bottom of the ship, that Jonah was a prophet. Prince Yury Mikhailovich, surely you knew that? You should accept without complaint."

The prince, seeming not to hear the governor's words, crossed himself before an ikon of the intractable Nicholas which hung opposite the place where he stood, and expressed the wish to hear prayers for the health of the tsar. The fleshy-lipped priest began, a deacon with a malicious, Saracen's face took up the chant and the haughty face of Jonah and his entire ship disappeared in the bronze-grey smoke of incense.

After prayers they went to inspect the farm. The prince showed them the stables and his rare dappled stallion, which had a white coat with reddish spots and a black tail and mane. The horse snorted and lashed out against its stall, like an untamed waterfall. Looking at the horse, governor Odudovsky asked:

"Unbroken? Not trained either to harness

or a saddle?" And he added, as if he already knew the prince's answer: "An unbroken horse resists, but will become accustomed and will go more uncomplainingly than a cow. Accept your lot."

And again there was some special, hidden meaning in his words, but the prince did not believe it and was silent. He only ruffled the irrepressibly long mane of the horse as he approached it.

They looked at skewbald and yellowish-russet horses with white manes and white tails; they looked at roan horses and then went over to the herd of cows and then to the apiary, the cellars, the barns and the mill, which had a hipped roof and was turned to the wind not by a windlass but by the wind itself. They walked about the farm for a good three hours, becoming tired and hungry. The prince observed this and invited them to sit down to table.

Prince Podzolyev's mansion, too, was painted inside, the lower half of the walls in large red double blooms and the upper half in small enamel-green leaves. The furniture matched the colour and size of the house and was not cumbersome. There seemed every reason to rejoice! However, a constant, ineradicable coldness could be felt in everything—in the village, in the church, in the mansion and in the outbuildings—it was as if a *fugá*, the windy winter cold that

sometimes continues for weeks and drives the flocks into gullies, had broken in here and taken up eternal residence. Hands and feet are chilled by this persistent, resolute and permanent cold and the heart is chilled still more.

They had begun to eat in silence and so they concluded the meal. Neither roasted meat, nor boiled meat, nor baked dishes, neither pies, nor fish nor poultry helped. The prince sat glumly and the governor ate and drank glumly. The foreigners sat sullenly at a separate table. And the curly-haired servants bustled indefatigably around the tables to no avail.

The guests rose. It was time to go. Time for the ship to set sail, for the sun was already going down in the west. The guests bowed low to the prince. The prince bowed in response. Our thanks for your hospitality. Mine for not scorning it.

"So we're leaving?" thought the irrepressible and self-willed Malprosta. "And what about the falcon? Shall I learn the truth? But how to do that if one does not seize the moment?" And Malprosta, who was not to be put off, decided at that moment to put his question. Bowing once again, he said:

"Prince Yury Mikhailovich! You are renowned as a hunter of falcons. Yet you have not shown us your hunt. Surely we shall not travel away without seeing this wonderful hunt?"

The prince's face changed. Fury shook his entire tall figure so that the marvellous scarlet tassels on his girdle swayed. But he quickly controlled himself and replied:

"Very well, if you are such a fervent hunter! I shall show you the chambers where the falcons are trained ... and the falcons as well...

They came to a wing of the house, to large chambers with high windows that allowed the sun's rays to enter freely and warm the birds of prey. The lintels in the windows were wide, to accommodate the perches on which the birds sat. In the tiled stoves—blue birds were depicted on them against a white background—fires smouldered, although it was summer, so that the falcons would stretch and shake themselves by the fire. This showed their perfect health.

"Oh, true God," Malprosta exclaimed in delight. "How marvellous your deeds are and how splendid all this is! "

The prince grew pink. Although the exclamation had been pronounced in another tongue, all languages are comprehensible to the hunter.

Wide pieces of sackcloth strewn with grass lay on the floor, should the falcons think of strolling about. A little above the floor, running diagonally across the chamber, birch rods were hung, also for the falcons' amusement. Wide basins of fresh water stood

beneath the poles and the floor around the basins was entirely sprinkled with river sand and small pebbles.

"Wonderful, wonderful! " Malprosta exclaimed again. "Everything here is an indication that I see good, real falcons before me."

The prince said:

"A good falcon should be broad in the shoulder and should squeeze itself up into a ball and fold one wing on the other so that the ends of its leading feather resemble straightened scissors. A falcon which spreads its wings and does not sit harmoniously reveals lack of vigour."

"Just so, prince, just so! " Malprosta exclaimed. "Florentines consider that the head of a good falcon, when sitting, should appear to be pressed in, as it were, between the shoulders. And it should have thick feet, and large claws. And when it sits on your hand it should be as heavy as a baby. You have good falcons, prince, beyond reproach! "

With a sigh the prince said:

"I see much with which to reproach my falcons. But all my life has been devoted to breeding a falcon such that no one else has..."

Perhaps only governor Odudovsky understood and took note of his exclamation, but the governor was tired from his meal, breathing heavily and feeling sleepy. Yawning,

he walked behind the interlocutors and was glad to see his ship, the bank and a carpet on which he could take a nap. Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto, too, was tired and had a cloudy vision of Florence, the bank of the Arno and the restless, disturbing charms of his young wife... Only the indefatigable Malprosta was not tired.

They arrived back on the bank by their vessel. On the other bank the prince's falconers were hunting birds. But the prince did not look at them.

From the high bank of the Oka Malprosta saw the rapid waters, seemingly plaited with silver, of the mysterious Russian river; he saw flat-bottomed boats cross these waters, the shirts of the oarsmen balloon out, he saw how the boats were filled to the gunwales with game, while there, on the other bank, by the lakes and tributaries, the falcon hunt was still going on, the riders were still galloping, waving lures, the clatter of rattles and the rumble of large Turkish drums could be heard, raising the birds from the surface of the water, and the falcons were still hovering in mid-flight, swooping down on the birds from above. These falcons and these huntsmen belonged to the prince, but the prince did not even look at them; he was thinking about his still imaginary falcon, which he would yet breed!

And then Malprosta asked what he had

passionately wanted to ask from the moment he had seen Prince Podzolyev:

"Signor prince! The past is a mystery and knowledge of the future is closed to us. Perhaps, therefore, it is immodest to question a person about that of which he himself does not wish to think. But I am young and bold. I shall ask! For I shall return to Florence and I shall be asked there if I saw Prince Yury Podzolyev and was it true that this prince killed and ate a very rare falcon from love of his lady? And I shall also be asked if I saw this incomparable lady?"

Again fury shook through the prince's entire body. And again he contolled himself and said to the foreigner:

"I believe I shall tell you the truth, foreigner. That tsar's gerfalcon was called Nosnik. It was from the north and in the north that is what skilled pilots are called, men who guide ships, who know the channels. Like all falcons, the gerfalcon becomes an increasingly lazy hunter with age. Nosnik did not know old age. He was firm, constant and unflinching."

The prince suddenly leaned towards Malprosta's face, seized him by the sidelocks and inclined his face downwards.

"Do you see?" he cried. "Do you see the boats filled with game tied up at the bank? Do you see the wench by the boats? Shouting, fussing—awkward, gross, a beast not trained

either to harness or a saddle?" He released Malprosta and cried, clasping his hands: "Surely it cannot be that I loved her. Surely it cannot be that for her sake I killed a tsar's gerfalcon?! Surely it cannot be that, like a locust eating corn, she has eaten me! "

Malprosta's tongue seemed to have frozen in his mouth from amazement. He opened his large, sensuous mouth and looked silently at the prince. But the prince continued to spit out words:

"Her, her! It was her, accursed woman, who has done all this! It is because of her that my heart has withered as if stricken and the hairs have dried up and fallen from my head like grass in a drought. It was because of her that the sovereign, learning of the fate of Nosnik, became angry and was so gracious as to say of me: 'The man is a fool! ' So it was to be. So I did, indeed, become a fool! So the word went through all Russia and into other lands and reached some base Florence or other! Our sovereign is a good man, glory to him! But his one good word 'fool' was enough to ensure that I have remained for ever in these forests to breed cattle and build peasant huts. My contemporaries are struggling against the Tartars in the east, struggling against the enemies of Russia in the west and they are winning fame and honour and renown. But what renown will I have in Russia, what

will the good people say of me?! Once there lived a fool, who ate a tsar's gerfalcon because of a stupid wench... Everything is ruined! I stamp my foot on this bank by the Oka, I am cast down and the wind blows on me and life passes me by, like wind through a bottomless barrel..."

Malprosta was silent, shaken by the truth of these words. The prince was dear to him, dear and close.

The prince looked coldly at the foreigners; if he had spoken to them, it was for another reason. Hearing that foreigners had come with the town governor and that these foreigners were master craftsmen, the prince had thought: "But what art is valued above all others by Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich? Falconry! And if foreign falconers are travelling with the governor, they are taking Russian gerfalcons to the shah of Persia..."

The prince asked with great hope in his voice:

"Why were you so eager to see my falcons? Perhaps the sovereign talked to you about my falcons? Is the sovereign waiting for me to breed a falcon better than Nosnik? Has the sovereign begun to think better of me than formerly? What can you tell me, friends?! "

Prince Yury was dear and close to the foreigner Malprosta. Malprosta would have been glad to reply affirmatively to the prince's question. But how could he reply?

The tsar had long since forgotten about Prince Yury Podzolyev, long since considered him old, helpless and incapable.

Malprosta replied silently, with his eyes: "The tsar does not speak of you. Endure, hold your peace also, if you can."

And the prince left him.

The helmsman shouted:

"Cast off, boys! " and turned the broad, wet tiller.

The vessel rocked. The mansion, the church, the peasants' huts, the prince's motley crowd of menials and tall, round-shouldered Prince Yury Podzolyev himself all disappeared behind the coral red forest, over which hung a dark purple sun, saying that tomorrow would be as windy as today.

The powerfully-built pilot, broad-bearded and in a blue shirt ballooned out by the wind, brought the bark out into the reach, into the channel itself. The bark moved without oars, the peasants helping with a tow-rope. The tow-rope alternately tightened and splashed in the water: sparkling drops flew from it and milk-white seagulls swept under it.

"What did Prince Podzolyev speak to you of, Malprosta?" Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto asked suddenly. "Of the falcon, perhaps? Has he repented of his stupid act or is he thinking of behaving in the same way in the future?"

Prince Yury was dear to the Florentine Malprosta. And he said:

"No, the prince has not repented. He thinks of behaving in the same way in the future also."

Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto compressed his lips and was silent.

"Oh, great God, how marvellous are your works! " Malprosta whispered, looking at the waves that a strong and dry wind was raising and at the *strelets* in green, who was standing on the prow by the front of the bark, and at governor Odudovsky, who was asleep, and at stooped Monsieur Philippe Andzoletto, who was looking ahead with swollen red eyes and grieving for his young wife and grieving for Florence and the river Arno, where a certain Cappiccio was selling a hotel not far from the main bridge... Monsieur Philippe wanted to go home, but the road there was far and uncertain, oh great God! "

1946

ARMOURED TRAIN 14-69

PARTISANS NEAR THE TRACKS!

I

The figures glittered before the eyes: 85, 64 and now again 0000 ... strung like ice beads. On the door of the compartment, on the window frame, on the strap, on the revolver holster. Everywhere. On the bunk, like an enormous fat figure 8, was Ensign Obab, assistant to Captain Nezelasov, his cropped head sunk into enormous shoulders that were like roads through the steppe.

Even on the cigarettes, which the captain reduced to ash one after the other, the ash melting softly in the belly of a split-open, cast-iron Chinese god, there were numbers and wafer-thin English letters.

"So what? We are flowing together, like pus from a wound ... out to the borderlands... Us! Everyone—the refugees and the govern-

ments that have drowned in the snow... We-ell! I'm telling you, ensign. Then where do we go? Into the sea?"

Obab glanced out of the corner of his eye at the twisted facial muscles of the captain. He answered gruffly:

"You should obtain treatment. You must. Yes! "

Ensign Obab was a promoted volunteer in Kolchak's army. All regular officers he called "a walking plague". He respected Captain Nezelasov and so he repeated:

"Things won't be good without treatment. For you."

Nezelasov hurriedly pulled out a cigarette:

"You are shut up tight, Obab ... nothing gets through to you! "

And knocking off the ash quickly, he said shrilly:

"How are we to get moving, at least a little bit... It's miserable, you know, Obab, miserable! Our homeland has cast us out! We went on thinking that we were necessary, very necessary, absolutely vital, and suddenly—you receive your dismissal papers... Not even dismissal papers, but a kick in the teeth ... and to hell with you! "

And the captain, coughing and spraying saliva and smoke, raised his voice:

"Oh, you slack and stupid slaves! "

Obab stretched out his long arm to the captain, who was doubled over. As if sup-

porting a sagging tree, he said with an effort:

"The swine are rebelling. They should be shot. And the stupid ones should be flogged."

"That's not the way, Obab, not the way..."

"Stuck. We are. Look at Ataman Semyonov. He doesn't stir his brains. Just strikes."

"I'm all dried out inside. The vodka doesn't flow, doesn't go down... Smoking gives me nothing but slush and stink... My head is like a brood-hen and one with three hundred eggs... Brooding. A-ach. Heat and steam! .. Hot and slippery, seething ... any moment it'll pop out. There's something to be overcome, but what I don't know and can't..."

"You need a woman. How long is it since you last had a woman?"

Obab looked dully at the captain.

"A woman is indispensable. Once a month on this sort of work. I'm healthy, 'cause I have a woman every two weeks. It's better than quinine."

"Perhaps, perhaps... I'll try. Why shouldn't I try..."

"You can try soon, there are plenty of female refugees here... Flowers! "

Nezelasov raised the window.

There was a smell of coal and hot earth. The station, packed tight with people, sweated like a tin of worms. Its walls gleamed wetly and there was a small bell near the door.

The people bore the mark of flight.

A spick and span teacher, like a new steel

pen, walked past, a dirty rag fluttering on his shoulder. The young ladies were uncombed, one cheek crumpled and pinkish-grey: no doubt the pillows were hard and perhaps no pillows at all, just kit-bags under the head.

"People are going to the dogs," Obab thought. He felt the desire to marry. "It would be nice to go back to a family..."

He spat into a handkerchief and said: "Nonsense! "

Nezelasov fingered the grey crumbling paper of a telegram. Just as everywhere else, there were figures on the telegram. As always, Obab's eyes clouded. He spoke in a wet, smacking voice:

"Again?"

"Again what? What's the matter?"

Obab and Nezelasov looked out the window.

The refugees were confusedly examining the steel armour of the carriages. The guns on the flat-cars seemed to be examining him, naked. Naked Nezelasov was bony, like a crumpled tin can: angles and grey smooth skin.

He said caustically into Obab's shoulder:

"They take us for rescuers... Knights in shining armour! They say in the telegram that Vershinin's detachment has appeared near the tracks ... in the town..."

Obab moved ponderously away from the window.

"Yids, captain. There are yids in the town and yids with Vershinin. Give me a cigarette."

"The Japanese will come... Give orders for water to be brought up ... without fail ... now."

"Against their arrival? Again! There's no holding you."

Obab slapped his thighs with hands that were long and even, like cords.

"I love it."

Noticing Nezelasov's glazed eye on him, the ensign said:

"I'm not talking about death. I'm talking about being on the move. When it's quiet—that's when the flesh mildews..."

Obab sighed staidly. His sweaty, sharp temples, looking like rye-bread rusks, sighed, a slow, peasant sigh.

"At home now, in Barnaul ... Barnaul district, the harvest has begun. My hands itch to hold the reins..."

Jumping up, Nezelasov asked:

"Ensign... Who is our commander? Our immediate commander?"

"General Smirnov."

"Ah yes? And where is he?"

"The partisans hanged him."

"Ah yes? I see. So who is the next in command?"

"The next in command?"

"I'm asking you..."

"Lieutenant-General Sakharov."

"Ah yes? Where is he? Where?"

"I don't know."

"Ah ... where is the army commander?"

"I don't know."

The captain tightened the belt and wanted to cry abruptly: "Well, don't argue—obey orders", but instead he turned and asked quietly, scratching the paint on the frame drearily with his finger:

"Who should we obey, ensign?.. Eh? Who should you and I obey by telegram... Well?"

Obab slapped the stomach of the little cast-iron idol, trying to catch a thought, but missed it.

"I don't know... If it's water, then we'll collect water... If it's shooting, then we'll shoot—no two ways."

And flapping his riding breeches like a goose its half-grown wings, Obab went down the corridor of the carriage mumbling:

"It's not my duty ... to think ... who am I ... a belt, a cartridge clip. No skin off my nose. Where is it?"

II

A puny little soldier in sky-blue puttees and big boots saluted hurriedly.

Not wanting to push his way about the platform Nezelasov strolled between the heated goods vans which housed evacuated refu-

gees beyond the carriages of the armoured train, which were sheathed with steel sheets.

"Unwanted Russia," he thought with shame and reddened, remembering: "And you are part of this Russia".

A rouged woman with a fat behind stirred Obab's suggestion to life in his body. The captain said loudly:

"Idiot! "

The woman looked round: miserable, lustreless eyes and a small, deeply-lined forehead.

Nezelasov turned away.

The heated goods vans were sheathed with darkened planks. Discoloured moss stuck out of the grooves. The doors were banged shut with straps in place of handles. Plaited bags containing meat, dressed poultry and fish hung on nails by the doors. There were fir branches above some of the doors and in these vans youthful female voice could be heard. A piano was being played in one van.

The vans smelt of sweat and napkins and by the rails there was the ammonia smell of trampled excrement. By one van, too, a soldier squatted trembling and howled through yellow teeth:

"O-o-o-eh-eh-eh."

"Dysentery," the captain thought, lighting a cigarette. "He's had it, then."

The feeling of shame and distant fury lodged somewhere in his legs did not cool.

A flat-spined old man, wearily raising a

heavy axe, was chopping up a half-rotten sleeper.

"Come far?" Nezelasov asked.

"From Syzran," the old man replied.

"Where are you going?"

The old man lowered his axe and answered dully, shuffling his bare feet with their grey, cracked toe nails:

"Where they take me."

His Adam's apple, which was covered with flabby wrinkles, was as large as a child's fist. When he spoke, the wrinkles smoothed out and clean, white bands of skin could be seen.

"Not very often ... he talks to someone, that's obvious," Nezelasov thought.

"I've got land there in Syzran," the old man said lovingly. "The very best black earth. It's not earth, it's gold—you could strike coins from it... And then, nothing to be done, I abandoned it."

"You're sorry?"

"Of course I'm sorry. But I abandoned it. I shall have to go back."

"It's a long way to go back ... very..."

The old man shook his head slightly without lowering his axe. He sighed with his shoulders somehow, sharply and with a whistle:

"A long way... They say that Vershinin has appeared on the line, y'r'excellency."

"That's not true. There's no one."

"Oh? So they're lying! " The old man

flourished the axe vigorously. "And they say that he's on the march, killing. Without mercy, even cattle. They say the only hope is the armoured train. The only hope. Well, what do you know...So there's no one?"

"No one at all..."

"That's absolutely wonderful, y'r'excellency. Maybe we'll even get to Vladivostok... We'll survive. Why should I go back, just tell me that?"

"You wouldn't last out... Don't bother yourself... Yes."

"That's what I say—I'll die while I'm still on the road."

"Don't you like it here?"

"The people here are not our sort. In our part of the world they're all nice and kind, but here they don't even know how to speak. A Chinese like that one doesn't understand Russian at all. And God knows how he lives! He doesn't live right. You could get covered with worms here. Maybe it would be better to go back? Forget everything and go? All the same, the Bolsheviks are people, too, eh?"

"I don't know," the captain answered.

III

In the evening smoke was blowing towards the station.

The forest was burning.

The smoke was light and warm and all around there was a smell of resin.

The brick buildings of the station, the pump-house, which looked like an earthenware mug, Chinese fanzas and the yellow fields of kaoliang foamed with bluish smoke and people immediately turned pale.

Ensign Obab laughed.

"Ventri-iloquists! Don't let'em scare you!"

And his long arms leaped greedily in the air, as if catching the laughter.

A consumptive female refugee with a sallow face, dressed in a chestnut manteau belted with a piece of string of the kind used to tie up sugar-loaves, ran with tiny steps about the station and whispered:

"The partisans ... the partisans ... they've set fire to the taiga ... and they're shooting ... Vershinin is approaching..."

She could be seen in all twelve trains at once. The velvet manteau was covered with ash and her sunken temples sweated. The anguish everyone felt was like a hunger.

The commandant of the station—the soldiers called him "four-storeyed"—a large-headed man with grey, transparent moustaches like icicles tried to calm matters.

"Maintain self-possession. Don't become excited."

"Chita has been taken! The Bolsheviks are in Vladivostok! "

"Nothing of the sort. Your ears are too

big. We are in communication with Chita. We have just been trying to find General Knox's nanny by telegraph."

And choking back a disrespectful chuckle, he explained:

"The British general Knox has lost his nanny. He is looking for her. A reward has been promised. A diplomatic nanny, damn it, and a partisan rapes her without a by-your-leave."

A blonde, curly-haired fellow who resembled a flowering cherry was sticking up posters and war communiqués from staff headquarters on the railway vans. And although no one knew where this staff headquarters was and who was fighting the bolsheviks, everyone's spirits rose.

Warm water streamed hurriedly down onto the ground. Thunder rolled. The taiga rumbled.

The smoke went away. But when the downpour ended and a rainbow rose in the sky, clouds of bluish smoke gushed again and it again became hot and hard to breathe. Sticky dirt stuck people's feet to the ground.

There was a smell of damp fields and wet kaoliangs rang softly beyond the fanzas.

Suddenly two Cossacks appeared and carried the corpse of a sergeant to a flat-car from behind the pump-house. His forehead was smashed and grey brain matter, looking like thick jelly, trembled on his nose

and on his reddish moustaches, upon which dark-red clots of blood had coagulated.

"The partisans got him," whispered the female refugee wearing a manteau belted with a string. "Vershinin... His bunch."

There was a stirring and a whispering in the brown vans:

"The partisans... The partisans..."

Captain Nezelasov walked along his train.

The refugee in the chestnut manteau was standing by the open platform of one carriage, hurriedly asking the soldiers:

"Your train won't abandon us?"

"Don't interfere," Nezelasov said to her, suddenly filled with hate for this thin-nosed woman. "Talking is forbidden! "

"They'll butcher us, captain! You know that well! "

Captain Nezelasov slammed the door and shouted:

"Go to the devil! "

Again a telegram was brought. Unclear orders, inevitably dragging in figures, had been given by someone to disperse Vershinin's partisan bands, which were assembling along the route of the railway. Finally there was some talk of Japanese, Italians...

"Telegram number twelve thousand, five hundred and forty-one, you see! An order, ensign, an order, I say... And who is there, who dares to give orders? Who is there?"

A good-natured, fat steam engine, sighing

with relief, pulled six carriages of Japanese soldiers up to the platform. Another engine followed. Small spick and span people resembling yellow-headed birds fluttered about the platform.

A Japanese officer found Captain Nezelasov in the locomotive of the armoured train. Stroking his revolver holster and slightly moving his elbows, the Japanese spoke softly in Russian.

"I ... am Lieutenant Tanako Mutstso. Yes-s. I ha-have been attached to you."

And, suddenly raising his voice, he screamed what had obviously been committed firmly to memory:

"Anni-hilate! Anni-hilate! "

Beside him stood an American correspondent in a field jacket with gleaming green buttons and striped knee-socks. Looking round the station and hurriedly scratching with his pencil, he said quickly what he, too, had memorised:

"And this? And this? Wh-wh-what?"

Obab and another officer, sweating and coughing, explained.

"Good," Nezelasov said. "Obab, give orders for the carriages carrying the ... Japanese to be attached to the train."

He slammed the heavy steel door.

"Come on, come on! " he cried shrilly, larding his orders with obscenities. And somewhere inside him the desire grew to see and

feel with his hands the gloom that was migrating from the train-loads of refugees to armoured train No. 14-69.

Captain Nezelasov ran along the inside of the train, brandishing his revolver menacingly. He wanted to shout more loudly, so that his cry should break through the felt carpeting and steel-clad walls of the vans. Otherwise his shouts would then have been useless.

The dirty soldiers stretched, their square faces freezing stiff, like ice. The tattered bulk of their clothing hindered their movement. Near the steel cannon he wanted to see them naked and did not want to feel their spirits guttering from fear.

The buffers crashed. The conductor whistled, an iron bucket fell from a bench noisily and the heavy steel boxes of carriages, carrying in themselves hundreds of human bodies filled with gloom and fury, falling yet unable to fall, flew into the darkness, pressing the rails to the ground, tossing behind themselves stations, pointmen's huts, forest covered with smoke and granite hills over which a warm and damp wind flowed.

IV

At this time the Chinese Sin Bin U was lying in the grass in the shade of a cork tree, his slanting eyes closed, and singing of how

the Red Dragon attacked the maiden Chen Hua.

The maiden's face was the colour of ginseng root and her food was u-vey-tsy, cocks' combs, ma-chu, mushrooms as big as eyeballs and chzhen-tszay-tsay. There was a great deal of all this and it was all very tasty indeed.

But the Red Dragon captured the gates of life from the maiden Chen Hua and then the rebellious Russian was born.

The partisans sat a little way off and Pentefly Znobov, joyfully forcing words brimming with unshakeable faith through his chattering teeth, shouted:

"They're on the run, my lads, they're on the run. We hit them where it hurt, knocked them to the ground and now they're thrashing around. Our duty is to stay awake. The town is strong, str-r-ong! It'll take care of everything! "

There was a smell of rock and of the sea.

A MAN FROM FOREIGN LANDS

V

"Vershinin's partisan gangs have been dispersed by the combined Russo-Japanese detachment with the support of armoured train No. 14-69.

"Our losses were 42 killed and 115

wounded. The tenacity of our allies in battle is above any praise. Pursuit of the enemy in the hills is continuing.

"Commander of armoured train No. 14-69 Nezelasov

No. 8701-7-19"

VI

And so:

Six days running their bodies had been conscious of hot stone, of trees languishing in the stifling heat, crackling ripe grasses and a limp wind.

And their bodies were like the granite hills, like the trees, like the grasses; they rolled hot and dry, over the narrow, trampled paths.

Their backs ached dully from the rifles pressing down on their shoulders.

Their legs ached as if they had been dipped into icy water, their heads were like dead reeds, empty and without sap.

Six days running the partisans had been on the march for the hills.

Cossack horse-patrols occasionally attacked the guards. Shots were heard then, like the crackle of bursting bean pods.

Meanwhile, in their rear, along the railway track, and deeper, in the fields and forests, the ataman's followers, Czechs, Japa-

nese and others from unknown lands burned the peasants' villages and trampled their fields.

Six days running, with short breaks for rest that were like prayers, two hundred partisans, protecting the cart trains carrying families and household goods ahead, wearily, had been following obscure trails. The road bored them and they often turned off the trails, breaking bushes, going straight between rocks towards the hills, which recalled enormous ants' nests.

VII

The Chinese Sin Bin U, pressing himself to the cliff, let the detachment pass him and kept telling furiously to each of the men:

"The Japanese—you have smash them... u-u-ukh, how smash them! "

And spreading his arms wide, he showed how the Japanese should be smashed.

Vershinin stopped and said to Vaska Okorok:

"For us the Japanese is worse than a panther. Now a panther, before it eats a Chinese, tears the clothes off him. To let him have an airing, but the Japanese won't mess about—he'll gobble him up, boots and all."

The Chinese was delighted that they were talking about him and set off beside them.

Nikita Vershinin, chairman of the partisan revolutionary staff, walked behind the detachment with the paymaster Vaska Okorok. Wide blue velveteen trousers as big as flour-sacks were wrapped tight round his large knees, like horse's hooves, and his face, weathered in patches by the sea, was lowering.

Vaska Okorok drew out his words, as if talking about a holiday, looking wearily and pensively at Vershinin's beard.

"In Roosia, Nikita Yegorych, they're going to build a tower of Babylon, no doubt about it. And they'll scatter us to the winds as a hawk does pullets, no doubt about it! So that we won't recognise each other. I'll say to you: want a drop of moonshine, Nikita Yegorych? And you babble back at me in Japanese! And Sin Bin U, blast him, will start singing in Russian. Eh?"

Vaska had formerly worked in the gold-fields and always spoke as if he had found a nugget and trusted neither himself nor anyone else. His hair was red and curly and he wagged his head lazily. He seemed to melt in the warm, weary wind blowing from the sea, in the hot, ennui-filled smells of earth and trees.

Vershinin transferred his rifle to his right shoulder and replied:

"Don't let your tongue run away with you, Vaska. Haven't we suffered enough?"

Suddenly Okorok laughed, overcoming his tiredness:

"You don't like the idea! "

"We are destroying our own wealth. The field there, the grain, the houses. And this won't pass unpunished. It's certain we'll have to suffer for this."

"Nikita Yegorych, the Japanese have to be thrown back good and proper. Fill their bellies with earth—and into the sea with them."

"The Japanese are a small people, what sort of demands can you make of them? They're a tuppenny ha'penny people. Like a cigarette—you think it's a smoke, the end glows, but it's just a joke. A pipe, now, is something different."

Streams of people, animals, carts and metal flowed into the channels of the paths, seething, with quiet, tired snores, in the woods and hills. Above, in the crags, the cedars lowered darkly. The heat dried hearts, like snapped-off twigs, and feet could find no place to rest, as if the ground were alight.

Again shots rang out behind them.

Several partisans fell back and prepared to defend the rear.

Okorok smiled broadly.

"I inspected the cart train today. Tha-at was fun! "

"Yes?"

"The cocks were crowing their heads off. Taking poultry into the hills with them, the devils. Eat 'em, that's what I said, they'll have to be left behind anyway."

"Impossible. A person can't live without animals. He will lose all his weight without animals. From the soul, that is, weight..."

Sin Bin U said loudly:

"Cossacks bad! Nippons swine, madame take little-little. It's bad! Cossacks bad! Red Roosian..."

Twisting his lips, he spat through his teeth and his face, which was the colour of the sand from gold-fields, the slits of eyes as narrow as melon seeds, smiled joyfully...

"Good! "

Sin Bin U stuck up his thumb in token of approval.

But the Chinese, failing to hear the laughter with which the partisans invariably greeted his words, said in a flat voice:

"Bad."

And he looked round miserably.

Like a herd of wild boar in flight from a forest fire, their lairs abandoned, the partisans strained towards the mountains in confusion and fury.

But the native land exercised a sweet pull over its sons—leaving was hard. In the cart trains the horses looked back and whinnied thinly, with a sob. Dogs that had forgotten how to bark ran silently. The last dust and the last pitch of their native parts flew off the wheels of the carts.

To the right oak-trees showed dark and ash-trees white in narrow ravines.

To the left—they just could not get away from it—the calm, dark-green sea smelled of sand and seaweed.

The forest was like the sea and the sea like the forest, only the forest was slightly darker—almost blue.

The partisans fixed their eyes on the west and in the west the pink granite hills shone gold and the men sailed with their eyes through the gaps between the trees and then sighed, and at those sighs the horses in the cart trains twisted their ears round and jerked their bodies, as if sensing the presence of a wolf.

But the Chinese Sin Bin U thought that the men wanted to see something different, something longed-for beyond the pink granite in the west.

The Chinese wanted to sing.

Nikita Vershinin was a fisherman, the son and grandson and great-grandson of fishermen.

He was miserable away from the sea and life for him was water and his five fingers were like the small mesh of a net: something or other was always getting into them.

A fat, soft woman, like an eel-pout, got into them. Year by year, she produced five children, five autumns, when the herring was running, and perhaps it was because of this that the kids grew up fair-haired and silver-scaled.

He was a lucky man in the fishing grounds—

"Vershinin's" luck was the talk of the entire *volost* and when the *volost* decided to oppose the Japanese and the ataman's men Nikita Yegorych was elected chairman of the revolutionary staff.

The carts carrying the kids and the women into the hills were all that survived from the *volost.* Life like log cabins, had to be built anew, as their forefathers had when they came here from the Perm lands into wild territory, and no one could tell whether they would succeed.

There was much that was incomprehensible—and his wife, just as in her youth, wanted to have a child.

Thinking was painful; he wanted to turn back and shoot at the Japanese and the ataman's men, at this smug sea which sent from its islands people who only knew how to kill.

At the foot of the precipitous shore boulders interrupted the road and a wicker suspension bridge was attached, balcony-like, to the cliff. The main force of the torrent strained against the boulders, while, below, the white foam of the most powerful current in the torrent battered epileptically among the rocks.

As they crossed the suspension bridge Vershinin asked:

"Shall we halt here, then?"

The men stopped and began to smoke.

They decided not to make camp, but to pass through Davya village and go from there

into the hills. At night they could rest in the hills.

By the grazing ground of Davya village a bare-legged peasant, his head bound up with a rag, was urging on a skewbald horse.

"There was a battle here, Nikita Yegorych," he said.

"Who was it against, then?"

"It happened in the village. The Japanese against our boys. A lot of people were killed. The Japanese have gone away—we drove them off—but we think they'll come back tomorrow. So there it is, we're packing up our bits and pieces and we want to go into the hills with you."

"Who are our troops, then?"

"I don't know, lad. Not from your *volost*, probably. Peasants, too. They've got machine-guns, good machine-guns. They rattle away like sewing-machines. And from the hills as well."

"We'll meet again! "

Carts and the corpses of people and animals lay about the broad village street.

A Japanese, a bayonet stuck through his throat, lay on top of a Russian. A long blue eye had slipped out on to the Russian's cheek. Flies crawled over his field shirt, which was soaked with blood.

Four Japanese lay face down by the dam, as if ashamed of something. The backs of their heads were smashed. Pieces of skin with

harsh black hairs had stuck to the backs of their neat uniforms and their yellow gaiters had been thoroughly cleaned, as if the Japanese had been intending to take a stroll through the streets of Vladivostok.

"They should be buried," Okorok said. "It's shameful."

The people of the village were loading their belongings into carts and the boys were driving out the animals. The faces of everyone were just as they always were—calm and businesslike.

A small white dog that had gone out of its mind wove in circles from one yard to another among the corpses.

An old man with a face like a threadbare grey sheepskin approached the partisans. The skin of his cheeks and forehead were red where scraps of fleece had fallen off.

"Are you at war?" he asked Vershinin in a tearful voice.

"We have to be, grandad."

"I see that things are not well with the people. There has never been so bad, so useless a war. Once the tsar called up the men, but now, devil take it, they fight among themselves."

"It's just the same as when you drive and drive and then, bang, your cart falls in half, grandad! It turns out that it went rotten long ago and you have to make a new one."

"Eh?"

The old man inclined his head towards the ground and repeated, as if listening attentively to a noise beneath his feet:

"I don't understand... Eh?"

"I say that the cart has broken down! "

The old man moved away, seemingly shaking water from his hands, mumbling:

"Well, well... that's what carts are like these days. Antichrist has been born, don't expect good carts."

Vershinin rubbed his aching back and looked round.

The small dog did not cease howling.

A partisan unshouldered his carbine and fired. The small dog curled up into a ball, then stretched out its entire body as if waking up. It was dead.

The old man scratched himself restlessly.

"Look,, even the dog has died of misery, Nikita Yegorych. But a man endures."

"Endures?"

"He does, Yegorych. They say the armoured train will go into the hills. Smash up everything and set it on fire."

"Don't shoot your mouth off to the people. Rails would have to be laid into the mountains."

The old man spat maliciously.

"It'll go without rails. If they've already linked up with the Japanese. The Japanese and the Yanks can do anything. Our end's in sight, Yegorych. Really our end. The

people are rotting, like the crops under rain... This captain with the armoured train, he's royalty, is he?"

"That's enough empty chatter..."

"He's got a vile temper and they say he's more than a *sazhen* tall, and his beard..."

VIII

The peasant with the bandaged head frenziedly drove his skewbald horse back out of the lane.

His body lay close against the horse's flat back, his face danced, his fists shook and he yelled joyously:

"They've caught a Yank, boys! "

Okorok shouted:

"Oho-ho-ho! "

Three peasants with rifles appeared in the lane.

Between them walked an American soldier dressed in a summer flannel uniform, limping slightly.

His face was clean-shaven and young. His bared teeth chattered with fright and a muscle on his right cheek twitched by the cheekbone.

"Who is your leader?"

"In what?" Vershinin replied.

"He's the senior man, he is! " Okorok shouted. "Nikita Yegorych Vershinin! How did you catch him, then?"

The peasant spat and clapped the American soldier on the shoulder, as if the latter had come of his own accord, before beginning his story with an old man's eagerness:

"I've brought him to you, Nikita Yegorych. We are from Voznesensk *volost*. Our detachment has gone wa-ay off after the Japanese! "

"Which village are you from?"

"All our village is fighting. Penino—maybe you've heard of it?"

"They say it was burned down?"

"Swine! They burnt the whole village down, mate, so we went into the hills! "

The partisans gathered round and said:

"It's one common grief! We know! "

The grey-haired peasant continued:

"There were two of them, the Yanks! They had canned milk with them in the cart! Crazy people: they came to fight, but they drink milk with chokalyte. We got one, but this fellow stuck his hands up. Well, we took him with us. We wanted to hand him over to the head-man, but it turns out there's a whole bunch of you here! "

The American stood erect, in soldierly style, keeping his eyes on Vershinin, as if on a judge.

The peasants crowded round.

The American caught the smell of tobacco and strong peasant bread.

The tightly packed bodies gave off a dizzying heat and a dry, burning fury rose from feet to head.

The peasants began to talk noisily:

"What are we staring for?"

"He should be shot, the swine! "

"Finish him off! "

"Kill him! "

"Bump him off! "

The American soldier hunched his shoulders slightly and fearfully drew his head in between his shoulders; this movement intensified still more the fury that was lashing his body.

"They burn villages, the swine! "

"Giving the orders! Bullying us! "

"As if they're at home! "

"Look where they've got to! "

"Invited them in! "

Someone cried in a shrill voice:

"Be-eat him! "

At this moment Pentefly Znobov, who had once worked on the Vladivostok docks, climbed on to a cart and shouted, as if pointing out something the others had lost:

"Ha-ang on! "

And added:

"Comrades! "

The partisans looked at his ragged moustaches, which resembled a fox's tail, and at his unbuttoned fly, through which his dark body could be seen, and fell silent.

"You can always kill someone! It's very simple. Killing doesn't cost a thing. You can see how many of them have been laid out in

the street. But I think, comrades, that we should tell him what we think and let him go. Let them have a sniff of Bolshevist truth. That's what I think! "

Suddenly a great roar of laughter came from the peasants, like millet pouring from a sack:

"Ho-ho-ho! "

"He-he! "

"Ho-o! "

"Button your trousers up, for God's sake!"

"So on, Pentya, say something to him! "

"Get it into his head! "

"After all, he's human, too..."

"Even on a block of stone you can carve words."

"Come on! "

Strong-bodied Avdotya Steshchenkova, picking up her straw-coloured skirts, leaned forward and shoved the American with her shoulder:

"You listen, cloth-head, it's you they want to do some good to."

The American soldier looked round at the hairy, red-bronze faces of the peasants and the unbuttoned opening in Znobov's trousers, listened to the incomprehensible talk and politely creased his clean-shaven face in a smile.

The peasants walked excitedly around him, shifting him about in the crowd, like a leaf over water; they shouted loudly, as if to a deaf person.

The American, blinking frequently as if from smoke in his eyes, and tilting his head upwards, smiled and understood nothing.

Okorok shouted at the American at the top of his voice:

"You explain to them there. In detail. Say it isn't good."

"What are they interfering with us for! "

"Making us fight our own brothers! "

Vershinin said in a dignified tone:

"You are good people, you must understand. Farmers, just like us, tilling the land and so on. The Japanese—who are they, rice-eaters, you have to talk differently to them! "

Znobov stamped his feet heavily in front of the American. He smoothed his moustaches and said:

"We are not bandits, we are bringing order. Your people don't know that, see, over the sea there, it's far away and your ideas are foreign, too..."

The voices rose and grew denser.

The American looked round helplessly and said:

"I don't understand."

The peasants simultaneously fell silent.

Vaska Okorok said:

"He doesn't get it. Doesn't know any Russian, poor fellow! "

The peasants moved away from the American.

Vershinin experienced a feeling of confusion.

"Send him to the cart train, why mess about with him here," he said to Znobov.

Znobov did not agree, stubbornly repeating:

"He'll understand! Here and here only! He'll understand! "

Znobov pondered.

The American, constantly favouring one leg, swayed slightly as he stood. Barely perceptible, an anguished expression stirred his face as a breeze stirs a haystack.

Sin Bin U lay down on the ground by the American and began to drone a shrill Chinese song, his hand over his eyes.

"Pure torment," Vershinin said miserably.

"Maybe some book or other?" Vaska Okorok suggested reluctantly.

The books they found were all Russian.

"They're only good for roll-your-owns," Znobov said. "If only they had pictures."

Avdotya went on ahead, towards the carts standing by the grazing ground, rummaged for a long time in the trunks and at last brought back a tattered, dog-eared scripture textbook for village schools.

"Maybe we could use a scripture book?" she asked.

Znobov opened the book and said in a puzzled voice:

"The pictures are religious! We aren't planning to convert him. We aren't priests."

"Well, have a go," Vaska proposed.

"How, then? He won't understand, that's sure! "

"Maybe he will. Go on! "

Znobov called the American over.

"Hey, comrade, come on here."

The American approached.

Again the peasants gathered round, again they breathed tobacco and bread.

"Lenin," Znobov said firmly and loudly and smiled somehow inadvertently, as if stumbling.

The American's entire body quivered, his eyes gleamed and he answered joyfully:

"There's a man! "

Znobov struck himself on the chest with his fist and slapped the peasants on shoulder and back with his palm.

"The Soviet republic! " he cried.

The American stretched out his hands to the peasants, his cheeks twitched and he cried excitedly:

"That's very good."

The peasants chuckled delightedly:

"He understands, the bugger! "

"There's a son of a bitch, eh! "

"Look, old Pentya speaks American! "

"Pentya, you tell their bourgeois where to get f-ed! "

Znobov hurriedly spread out the scripture textbook and stabbed his finger at a picture in which Abraham was preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac, God hovering above them in the clouds. He began to explain:

"This fellow here with the knife—he's a bourgeois. See, he's got a belly, all he needs is a watch and chain. And here, on the logs, the proletariat's lying, see? Pro-le-ta-ri-at."

The American pointed to his chest and said proudly, drawing out the word and stammering joyfully:

"Pro-le-ta-ri-at! Us! "

The peasants hugged the American, felt his clothes and squeezed his hands and shoulders with all their strength.

Vaska Okorok grabbed him by the head and bellowed enthusiastically as he looked into his eyes:

"Fellow, you tell them the-ere. Over the seas there..."

"That's enough of bending his ear, windbag," Vershinin said affectionately.

Znobov continued:

"He's lying there, the proletariat, on the logs and the bourgeois's cutting his throat. And in the clouds there's a Japanese, a Yank, an Englishman—all those imperialist swine sitting there."

The American tore off his cap and yelled:

"Imperialism! Down with it! "

Znobov flung his cap bitterly to the ground.

"To hell with imperialism and the bourgeois! "

Sin Bin U bounded up the American and said hurriedly as he pulled up his slipping trousers:

"Roosia repubricric. Chinee repubricric. Merica repubricric—bad. Japs, bad, need, need repubricric. Red repubricric need, need..."

And looking round, he rose on tip-toes and said, slowly lifting up his thumb:

"Good."

"He must be fed," Vershinin ordered. "And then take him to the road and release him."

The senior convoy guard asked:

"Shouldn't we bind his eyes, how should we take him? Won't he bring them here?"

The peasants decided:

"That's not necessary. He won't give us away."

IX

The men slung their rifles on their shoulders, laughing and whistling. Okorok twisted his red, curly head round and suddenly began to drawl in a thin little voice like a cobweb:

I shall sow sadness over the green meadow,
Grow, my grief, a fine-leaved sward.
Do not fade, do not wither, with flowers bloom...

And someone's quick and cheerful voice joined in after Vaska:

I went to sow, into the green orchard I went,
In the orchard were many cherries, grapes and pears.

And then a hundred hoarse peasants' voices, gusty as a sea wind, rose and carried to the paths, the forest and the mountains:

I went to sow,
Into the green orchard I went.

—O-h-h...
—Whee-ee...

Roaring, howling and whistling the partisans marched into the hills, as if celebrating a wedding.

The sixth day was fading.

The evening trees gave off an agonizing and joyful smell.

IN THE TOWN

X

Heaps of sole, eels like wet cords and thick layers of *navaga, sazan* and lancet fish lay on wide mats woven from kaoliang. The sky and the stones of the houses were reflected in the scales of the fish. Their fins still retained the soft colours of the sea—sapphire-golden, bright yellow and deep orange.

The Chinese looked at the piles of meat indifferently, as if at the ground, and cried shrilly, as if giving birth:

"Tre-epa-ang! Capt'in Lussian! Cla-ab! Trepa-ang! Buying? Eh-h?"

Pentefly Znobov, spattered with yellow mud and smelling of silt, sat in a boat by the steps of the quay and said with dissatisfaction:

"The Chinese yells his head off, but all he's got to offer is fish."

"Then you sell something! "

"Our business is smashing everything! Smashing and smashing, I'm sick of it. When will we start to build something! Ach, if only we could find a Japanese with some education! "

The sailor lowered his feet towards the water, playing with the crest of a wave with his soles, and asked:

"What do you want a Japanese for?"

The sailor had a round, smooth head like an egg and dirty, protruding ears. His shirt, very wide trousers, supple sleeves splashed, like the sea by the boat. The quay, the entire town splashed and swam...

"A cheerful person," Znobov thought.

"I can find a Japanese. I'll do it. There are plenty of them here! "

Znobov got out of the boat, bent down towards the sailor and said in a whisper, looking over his shoulder at the motley crowd, which was like a patch-work quilt, the clanging tramcars and the dispassionate, blue-and-yellow tunics of the Chinese:

"I want a particular Japanese, not a local. For distributing leaflets. Writing them and

sticking them up round the town. Here, look! It could be distributed among their troops."

He thought of a yellow scrap of paper, covered with incomprehensible signs, and smiled tenderly.

"They will understand! You know, we moved one American to tears. He wept ... just as if a water-can had burst..."

"Maybe it was from fear?"

"Don't split hairs. The main thing is, you have to explain how things are to a person. Without that what can you ask of him, blockhead?"

"It will be hard to find a Japanese like that."

"That's what I say. The only way will be to stumble on him."

The sailor half-rose on to his toes. He looked at the crowd.

"Look how many people! Maybe even there's a good Japanese here, but how will you find him! "

Znobov sighed.

"It will be hard. Especially for me. I don't see people at all. The inside of my head now is just like the gallery in church! Your own chaps come in and sing, but the rest of the public can just listen. Scales in my eyes."

"There are plenty like that now."

"It's the only way. When you walk along a path, keep your eyes on one point, other-

wise your head will spin and you'll crash into a gulley and dry your bones there. Repent."

Some neatly-dressed Canadians passed by, laughing loudly. Japanese, looking like figures cut out of turnip, walked in silence. The silver-laced ataman's men jingled their spurs.

The sea leaned wearily against the granite. A wind, damp, like foam, smelling of fish, ruffled the hair. Lilac-grey ships, white-headed Chinese schooners and fishermen's boats shone in the bay, like flowers printed on calico.

"A pigsty, not Roosia! "

The sailor jumped up and down springily. He laughed heartily.

"Just wait, we'll teach them a lesson! "

"Shall we go?" Znobov asked.

"Come on, old timbers! "

They climbed up Peking Street.

A smell of roast meat, garlic and oil came from the doors of the houses. Two Chinese porters, adjusting tightly-strapped bales of material on their shoulders, laughed insolently as they looked at the Russians.

Znobov said:

"They're laughing, the devils! My belly feels as if a new house is being built in it. Yes, and it's suddenly collapsed! I'd like to give them a good punch on the nose, the swine! "

The sailor shifted about inside the shell of his shirt and coughed.

"It depends..."

The immense coastal city seemed to be living its usual life.

But the enervating misery of defeat had already stamped its ulcerous mark on the faces of people, on animals and on houses. Even on the sea.

Behind the gleaming glass windows of the cafés officers could be seen, tightly buttoned up in field jackets, sitting behind small tables and hurriedly drinking brandy, as if poking the glasses into themselves. Their shoulders were wearily bent. Gaunt fluttering eyelids often descended on their eyes.

Horses as thin as ash branches, worn out by the retreat, hauled carts full of dirty linen, limping feebly. The linen had been evacuated from Omsk by mistake, instead of shells and cannon. And the thought in everyone's mind was that it had been taken from corpses.

The blank spots of houses half-destroyed during an uprising stung the eyes like soap solution.

And the sea lapped with a different, alien face from that it had always had.

And the green ocean wind brushed its wing over the city in a different way, from beyond a distant horizon, thin and ringing, like a steel wire.

The sailor saluted in a leisurely and slightly dandyish way.

"Aren't you afraid of narks?" he asked Znobov.

Znobov was thinking about the Japanese and answered a little hurriedly, dredging up thoughts that lay deeper:

"No, no. I've got something else on my mind. I was afraid at first, but then I got used to it. Now they're waiting for the Bolsheviks, they're afraid of vengeance and so people who know me don't give me away." He grinned. "That's how we've frightened them. They won't get over it in ten years."

"We were frightened enough ourselves! "

"Ye-es! Were there no arrests here?! "

"Three were taken."

"Ye-es... Come and join us in the hills."

"Rocks, trees. I don't like that ... it's boring."

"That's true. You could build good houses from that rock. Just like America. It lies around doing no good, you can't eat it or sleep on it. The peasants don't mind, but I find it boring, too. We'll have to advance on the city."

"Go on, then. How does Vershinin see things?"

"Vershinin is a cloud—where the wind blows, he blows, and the rain with him. Vershinin goes where the peasants go..."

XI

Comrade Peklevanov, the chairman of the underground revolutionary committee, was

sharpening a pencil with a penknife. He was a small freckled man in horn-rimmed glasses. The sun played sharply on the lenses of his glasses, like the blade of the penknife, as if honing his eyes and they gleamed anew.

"You come often, Comrade Znobov," Peklevanov said.

Znobov laid his fingers, cracked from wind and water, on the table and said in a taut voice:

"The people want to work.

"Well?"

"But they aren't allowed to. They've been brutalised and keep pushing me. As if it wasn't hard enough for me to come to you, like a bride talking round a rich man."

"We shall inform you."

"We're sick of waiting. It's worse than vomiting. We should be firing at trains, setting fires, hitting at the Cossacks... Again the armoured train. The Japanese are like a forest fire—they don't pick and choose."

"You'll get over it."

"We know that. If we didn't get over it, what would be the point of dying? They want to blow up a bridge."

"Splendid. An initiative is necessary, very necessary. Wonderful."

"Shells are needed and a man with the shells; too. A dynamiter is needed."

"We'll send one. A man and some dynamite. Do it."

They were silent. Peklevanov breathed passionately and exhaustedly:

"You lack discipline."

"Among ourselves?"

"No, within yourselves."

"We-ell, no one has that sort of discipline now..."

The chairman of the revolutionary committee scratched an itching sharp elbow. The skin on his cheeks was unhealthy, as if he had gone without sleep for a lifetime, but somewhere deep down joy was gushing and jolts of it, like a child in the womb of an expectant mother, reddened his cheeks in spots.

The sailor extended his hand and shook Znobov's, as if pressing out juice. He went out.

Znobov moved closer and asked quietly:

"The peasants are always on about an uprising—ist't it coming off then? If the balloon goes up, we'll send 3,000 men here from the villages. Veterans of the German war. Does a plan exist?"

He spread his hands wide, as if embracing the table, and whispered in a tired voice:

"And you loose that leaflet on the Japanese. Let it go right through their hearts like a burning arrow... We had one American, brought him to tears..."

Peklevanov had a sunken chest, spoke in a feeble voice and had quiet eyes—in spectacles.

"Well, you know, we're thinking about it... We're taking measures."

Znobov suddenly felt sorry for him.

"You're a good man, but as a leader ... well..." he thought and he wanted to see a leader before him—a powerful clean-shaven man, for some reason completely bald.

A large newspaper was scattered about the table. On it was a dour lump of black bread and salami sliced up small and near them, on a blue dish, were two potatoes and by the dish a piece of sugar.

"Birdfeed," Znobov thought with dissatisfaction.

Peklevanov rubbed his unshaven cheek from bottom to top with his shoulder and said:

"At the hour appointed for the uprising workers and soldiers allied with them will appear in trams from all sides of the city. They will cut the telegraph wires and seize government offices."

Peklevanov spoke as if reading a telegram and Znobov was filled with a feeling of joy. He shook his moustaches and said hurriedly:

"We-ell, well! And it won't fall through again! You already believe..."

"All the rest will be done by the revolutionary committee. In the future it will direct operations."

Znobov planted his hands, pining from their own power, on the table and asked:

"Is that all?"

"For the time being."

"Well, it isn't much, comrade... It really isn't... Well, think about us..."

Peklevanov's fingers scurried among the buttons of his jacket and spots appeared on his freckled face. He seemed to be offended.

Znobov mumbled:

"The peasants can't be abandoned like that, either. They should be called into action. Otherwise we'll have been sitting in the hills for nothing, like hens on bad eggs. There are lots of us, comrade ... thousands..."

"What about Japanese? There are about forty... Forty thousand."

"That's true—they may squash us like lice. But they'll make it anyway."

"Who will?"

"The people. The peasants want to fight."

"You've got a lot of socialist-revolutionary sentiments among your men, Comrade Znobov. You smell of earth."

"And you smell of salami."

Peklevanov emitted a kind of many-toned chuckle.

"I'll give you a drink. Do you want vodka?" he proposed. "Only don't stay for too long and don't curse the government. They're on our tracks."

"We'll go easy."

After drinking a glass of vodka Znobov broke out in sweat and wiped his face on a towel, hiccuping tipsily. He said:

"Don't you get angry, lad—keep cool. I

didn't like you at first, though, and that's the honest truth."

"It's over?"

"Nothing left now. We shall blow up the bridge, brother, and then there's such an armoured train there."

"Where?"

Znobov spread his hands:

"It's ... moving along the line. The number fourteen's there and some other numbers. That's what it's called. It's destroyed many men. Maybe a million lives it's cut off. So we'll ... you know ..."

"Into the water?"

"What for? We shall have justice behind us. It's government property and we shall take it as it is."

"There are cannon on it."

"That doesn't mean anything, either. Just as things turn out and damn everything..."

Znobov shook his head lethargically.

"Your vodka is strong. My body is like the ground—it doesn't listen to the human voice, just its own."

He lifted his foot to step over the threshold and said:

"Goodbye. You're a man of the past, you really are."

Peklevanov cut off a piece of salami and drank some vodka. He looked at the fly-blown wall and said:

"Ye-es ... of the past."

Grinning cheerfully, he took a piece of paper, and began to write out instructions to rebellious military units, his pen scratching loudly.

XII

Outside, Znobov saw a Japanese soldier by the front garden.

The soldier wore a cap with a red band and yellow leggings and was carrying a long enamel bowl. The Japanese had a hard, small mouth and sparse moustaches, like a dragonfly's wings.

"Hang on now! " Znobov said, taking him by the sleeve.

The Japanese jerked his arm away violently and cried in a sharp voice:

"Ha! Wot are you doing?"

"Oink! You hog. Talk to you nicely and you oink back! Do you believe in God?"

The Japanese narrowed his eyes and surveyed Znobov from under upswept eyelashes, like the corners of pagoda roofs—from shoulder to shoulder, then Znobov's boots. Noting the dried yellow mud on them, he made a wry mouth and said hoarsely:

"Russia swine. Ha?"

And, pressing the bowl to his ribs, he departed unhurriedly.

Znobov followed him with his eyes, look-

ing at the provocatively glinting metal buckles on his belt.

"You're an idiot, I'll tell you that! " he said with disappointment.

THE CHINESE SIN BIN U

XIII

Three days later the sailor Anisimov came rushing to Vershinin's detachment, the reed-plaited cart carrying him disintegrating beneath his bulk.

His forehead burned with blisters, one cheek was nothing but a scratch and a red ribbon dangled on his chest.

The sailor shouted from the cart:

"There's an uprising in the city, comrades! Come on... Captain Nezelasov has been ordered to take the armoured train there in two ticks... Right away. The workers are striking—in short, come on and no back-chat! So, we shall entrust the armoured train to you... And I shall organise a militia."

And he galloped away into the hills—a cheerful sailor.

The cloud over the hills was like a red ribbon.

XIV

This is the long story of how Sin Bin U came to hate the Japanese. Sin Bin U had a wife from the family of Ye, a strongly-built hut, a warm painted wooden shelf for a bed in the hut and yellow fields of kaoliang and *chumiza** behind the hut.

But one day, when the geese had flown south, everything vanished.

Except that he found his cheek had been pierced by a bayonet.

Sin Bin U used to read Shi Tsin** and plait mats for the city, but he threw Shi Tsin into the well, forgot the mats and went with the Russians along the road of rebellion.

Sin Bin U was resting on the sand, by the sea. It was warm beneath him and warm above him, as if the sun were burning the sand through his body and roasting it.

His legs were splashing in the sea and when a warm wave, as warm as fresh milk, ran under his shirt and trousers Sin Bin U would draw up his legs and swear.

Sin Bin U did not hear what the thick-moustached, long-nosed Russian said. Sin Bin U killed three Japanese and he so far was content.

*A type of Chinese millet.—*Tr.*

**A book of poetry indicating that Sin Bin U was a man of education.—*Tr.*

The beards of the peasants were like marsh slime, yellowish-green and tangled from the sun and the damp wind, and the peasants smelled of animals and grass.

Machine-guns with shields like green plates, cartridge belts and rifles were by the carts.

A wounded man, covered with a torn tarpaulin, tossed about on a cart with a low front board. Avdotya Steshchenkova gave him something to drink from a wooden cup and said coaxingly:

"Don't you groan, it will pass! "

The area between the carts was tightly packed with a sweaty crowd. The carts, too, seemed to sweat, squeezed by raging human flesh. The dull red lines of lips growing out of beards gleamed with spittle in the sun.

"O-o-o-oo-oo-oo! "

Vershinin's whole body hurt, as if this wordless roar had tossed him on to the points of bayonets, and he yelled, deafening himself with a visceral shout:

"Don't give the land to the Japane-ese! We shall take everything back! Don't give up the land! "

He simply could not close his throat. Everything that he had said seemed insufficient to him. No other words came.

"Don't give i-t u-p! "

The crowd took up his cry:

"A-a-a! "

And for a moment it fell silent. The crowd sighed.

The wind carried the smell of sweat.

The partisans were having a mass meeting.

Vaska Okorok's face, red-brown as a sunflower, rushed wildly about in the crowd and his lips, cracked from the heat, whispered:

"The pe-eople... The people are millions strong, comrades! "

Tall, fleshy, like a rearing horse, Nikita Vershinin bellowed from a stump:

"The main thing is: don't give it u-p! .. Soon an army will come here ... a Soviet army, and don't you give it up ... old man!

Just as a fish that has fallen into a seine-net throws itself powerfully at the mesh, so everyone threw himself at the same word:

"Do-n't-gi-ve-u-p! ! "

And the word seemed on the point of collapse, of breaking apart. Something incomprehensible, malicious, like a typhoon, might appear.

At this moment a scrawny man in a raspberry-coloured silk shirt, pressing his hands to his stomach, confirmed in a shrill voice:

"I believe him—after all, it's true! "

"Because Petersburg is on our side ... national ... and every other land! There's nothing to fear... The Japanese—so what, the Japanese are no problem ... they're feather! "

"That's true, fellow, that's true! " the scrawny man howled.

The dense, sweaty, thousand-strong crowd trampled upon his yell.

"That's tru-ue..."

"Don't gi-i-ive! "

"Na-a! "

"O-o-oo-oo-oo! "

"O-o! ! ! "

XV

After the mass meeting Nikita Vershinin drank a ladle of moonshine and walked towards the sea. He sat down on a rock by the Chinese and said:

"Pull your legs up, you'll get your trousers wet. Why didn't you go to the meeting, Senka?"

"No leason to," the Chinese said. "Me no leason to... Me know al-leady ... know all ... good."

"Pull your legs up! "

"No leason. The sun is warm. No leason—ah! "

Vershinin frowned. Speaking slowly and deliberately he said sternly, not looking directly at the Chinese:

"It's a big mess. Many people are killed, but you can't see the point of it... My spirit whines, Senka, like a kitten thrown out into the cold ... ye-es... We'll blow up the bridge, but it will have to be built again afterwards."

Vershinin drew in his stomach, so that his ribs were stretched under his shirt like willow roots under dried silt, and asked interrogatively, bending down to the Chinese with a darkened face:

"And you ... what do you think... Eh? Why is this, eh?"

Sin Bin U, hurriedly drawing the loops on the wooden buttons of his jacket tight, crawled away timidly.

"Don't know, Kita. Don't know! "

Vershinin bent over the Chinese as he crawled away, sinking deep into the sand with his heavy boots, and asked mournfully and without hoping for an answer, as if of an idol:

"Well, the devil with you! Noone knows, then? Eh?"

It seemed quite impossible to the Chinese to rise to his feet and he mumbled:

"Don't know! Don't know nothing! "

Vershinin suddenly felt exhausted and sat down on a rock.

"Well, the devil with you! No-one knows, no-one understands... They got us all roused up, off we dashed and now what?"

And settling himself heavily on the rock, like a wood-demon, he said wearily to Okorok, who was approaching:

"Either the people's brains have gone soft or mine have..."

"What?" Okorok asked.

"The people are going looking for death."

"Where?"

"They want to take the armoured train. Lots of people are going to be killed. People are being carried towards death like snow towards a hole in the ice."

Okorok whistled and stuck out his lower lip.

"Are you sorry?"

Znobov approached, papers pressed under his arm.

"Orders to sign! "

Vershinin thickly scrawled the letter V on the paper and followed it with a long fat line.

"I used to huff and puff, could just barely write my name, but praise be, I had a bright idea, wrote down one letter and a line and there you are ... people know."

"Are you sorry?" Okorok repeated.

"What about?" Znobov asked.

"About people dying."

Znobov thrust a document into his folder and said:

"You keep blathering about trifles. Why should I be sorry for people? New ones will grow up."

Vershinin replied hoarsely:

"If only there were real keys. But you know, maybe doors should be opened by other keys."

"Why go then?"

"I'm sorry for the land. The Japanese will take it away."

Okorok gave a dissipated chuckle.

"Oh, you protectors of the land, the devil take you! Ugh! "

"What are you cackling about?" Vershinin said, his voice tight with anger. "Some love the sea and some the land. The land is firmer, my lad. I'm from a fishing family myself..."

"Well, prophet?"

"I'm giving up fishing now."

"What for?"

"I haven't gone through all this to go back to sea again. I'll take up farming. The town's a fraud, like a soap bubble, you can't put it in your pocket."

Znobov remembered the town, the chairman of the revolutionary committee, the bright spots of people on the jetty, the trams and houses, and said with dissatisfaction:

"We don't need your land, ignoramus. We shall take the land of all the universe and hand it over to the toiling masses—sign on the dotted line! "

Okorok stretched out on the sand beside the Chinese and said, after ploughing up the sand with his feet:

"When they shoot the Japanese mikado he'll squeal, the whore. What a laugh! Not expecting it, is he? Eh, Senka? What do you think, Yegorych?"

"They know best," Vershinin replied reluctantly.

The sand was overlooked by cliffs and beyond them there were mountains. Oaks.

Larch. High up on a cliff stood a man in yellow, like a lump of resin on the trunk of a pine tree—a sentry.

Vershinin walked between the carts, treading heavily.

Sin Bin U said:

"He got a little thinner, wot d'you think?"

"It will pass," Okorok said soothingly, lighting a cigarette.

Sin Bin U agreed:

"No matter."

XVI

The uncouth little fellow in the raspberry-coloured shirt seized Vershinin by the flap of his jacket and moved aside, whispering mysteriously:

"I understand you. You think I'm the thickest of the thick. Knock it into their heads and they'll believe you and follow you! The most important thing for them is to believe in someone... And the Internashinil?"

He winked and went on quietly:

"I know there's nothing in it, after all. You'll never find anything good behind a too clever word like that. A word should be simple—like field, say... That's a good word."

"I'm sick of good words."

"Rot. You'll go on saying them. Knock them

into their heads. You can weed out anything extra later on... It's always done like that. After all, some people need a gige-egantic measure, that's what they're like... Don't want to measure in inches, the swine, but in miles. Well, let them, let them measure... *You* know your own measure... He-he-he! "

The fellow clapped Vershinin on the shoulder in a familiar way.

Vershinin's body shrank and burned. He lay down under a cart, tried to sleep, but could not.

He jumped up, belted his stomach tightly, washed with warmed water at a cast-iron wash-basin and went to call together the young fellows.

"Come on, drill. Look lively! "

Obediently they assembled, their faces shifting and formless as jelly.

Vershinin formed them into line and gave the order:

"Attent-tion! "

The shout made him feel a soldier.

"Marking from the ri-ight!.."

Vershinin drilled the young fellows until late evening.

They sweated, bad-temperedly going through the drill and shooting glances at the sun.

"Half turn to the le-eft! Don't forget we shall be marching against the Japanese."

One of the fellows smiled piteously.

"What's the matter with you?"

Blinking eyelashes bleached by sea salt, the fellow said timidly:

"What do we want to march against the Japanese for? We should hold on to what we've got. The Japanese have got the se-ea, they say... And their water is hot, a Christian can't drink it."

"They're people, like us, blockhead! "

"What are they yellow for, then? It's from the hot water, people say?"

The young fellows chuckled.

Vershinin walked along the row of men and commanded sternly:

"Company-y, fi-ire! "

They clicked their rifle-bolts.

A peasant lying under a cart raised his head and said:

"Drilling them. He's a thorough chap, that Vershinin..."

Another man answered him sleepily:

"A rock, a crag... He'll be a great commissar."

"Him? No doubt about it."

ENSIGN OBAB

XVII

The Cossack answered exhaustedly:

"Yes, sir ... with the papers..."

The peasant stood, his trunk thrown back, and his beard, which was like a reddish kerchief, was pressed close to his chest.

The Cossack handed over an envelope and said:

"He was found on the other side of the rocks! "

The young, large-eyed station-master, leaning exhaustedly on a low table, began to interrogate the partisan:

"You ... whose band are you in... Vershinin's?"

Suppressing his irritation, Captain Nezelasov ran his palms over the station-master's bench, which had a dirty smell, like a soldier's foot-cloth, and shivered convulsively. He wanted to go away, but the telegraph clattering in the next room prevented him.

"Perhaps ... an order ... perhaps..."

Shifting the dully gleaming rectangles of documents, the station-master asked in an exhausted voice:

"How many? What? Where?"

Plaster peeled off the walls whenever the front door slammed. Nezelasov thought that the station-master was pretending to be calm.

"Wants to please us ... the armoured train ... our boys, he says..."

And there was a pain right inside him like that a bear feels when it swallows a piece of ice with a whale bone corkscrew frozen

into it. The piece of ice melts, the spring straightens out and tears the insides—first one gut, then another...

The peasant spoke in an obdurate, dead voice and looked around sternly only at the words: "They say the city in our hands" before hiding his eyes again.

A woman's rosy face appeared at the ticket window:

"The town doesn't answer, sir."

The station-master said:

"They say they aren't shooting—using sticks instead..."

"What?" the rosy face asked.

"Get on with your work, that's nothing to do with you! Did you hear, captain?"

"Perhaps ... anything's possible... But I think, in fact..."

"What?"

"The partisans have cut the wires. Yes, they've cut them, only..."

"I don't think so. On the other hand..."

When the captain came out on to the platform the station-master, placing his body exhaustedly on the window-sill, said loudly:

"Captain, take up the arrested man."

The red-bearded peasant was sitting motionless in the armoured train. His blood had receded within him and his face and hands had become slimy, like wet, grey clay.

When he was shot it seemed to the soldiers that they were shooting a corpse. Pro-

bably for that reason a soldier ordered before firing:

"You, take off your boots now, otherwise we'll have trouble with them later."

The peasant pulled off his boots with a practiced movement.

It was repulsive, afterwards, to see the blood gushing from the wound.

Obab brought a puppy into the compartment—a small soft bundle. The bundle crawled uncertainly from the ensign's broad palm on to the bed and began to whine.

"What do you need that for?" Nezelasov asked.

Obab grinned in a way that was somehow his own.

"Livestock. In our village we had cattle. I'm from Barnaul *uezd.*"

"Futile ... yes, futile, ensign."

"What?"

"Who needs your *uezd* here? You ... well ... you are Ensign Obab, you wear gold epaulettes and ... you are an enemy of the revolution. And that is that."

"Well?" Obab said harshly.

And the captain, showing just a glimpse of the pleasure he was feeling, said:

"As such ... an enemy of the revolution ... that means you are liable to be destroyed. Destroyed! "

Obab looked dully at his knees and his broad and knotty fingers, reminiscent of dry

roots, and said in a lacklustre, slow voice:

"Nonsense. We shall make mincemeat of them! "

It was stiflingly hot in the armoured train now that it moved. Bodies dissolved into sweat and hands stuck to walls and benches.

Only when the peasant with the red beard was taken out and shot did a weak, sickly wind blow feebly into the carriage and slightly refresh the men's faces. A piece of steel sky appeared for a moment and the rags of torn limp maple leaves.

The puppy squeaked mournfully.

Captain Nezelasov hurried through the carriages, cursing shrilly, like a woman. The soldiers had long, withered faces and the captain spattered the men with words:

"Silence, nits. Don't talk, keep silent! "

The soldiers stuck out their cheek-bones still more, frightened by their inflamed thoughts. While the captain was bellowing they thought that someone, ignoring discipline, was quietly whining by the machine-guns and the cannon.

They looked round in alarm.

The steel sheets that covered the fragile wooden boards were being carried along rails straight as matches—to the east, to the city, to the sea.

XVIII

Sin Bin U was sent off as a scout.

He poured roasted sunflower seeds into a wicker basket, put a revolver in the bottom and smiled cunningly and joyfully as he sold the seeds.

An officer in black riding breeches with double silver-lace stripes noticed the face of the Chinese, brimming with joy, and bent towards him, asking quickly:

"Do you have any cocaine?"

Sin Bin U tightly squeezed the slits of his hooded, thin eyelids, and replied, as if regretfully:

"None."

The officer drew himself up sternly.

"And what have you got?"

"I have seeds."

"Sold yourself to the yids," the officer said, moving away. "You ought to be hanged!"

A narrow-chested little ranker in blue puttees and a greatcoat like a dirty hospital robe was sitting beside the Chinese.

"At home in Semipalatinsk guberniya, brother chink, the water-melons are quite special—Chinese water-melons are miles behind," he told him.

"Good," the Chinese agreed.

"I'd like to go home, but they're taking me towards the ocean. See?"

"Go."

"Where?"

"Home."

"I'm tired. If they take me I'll go, but I've no strength to go myself."

"Lots of seeds."

"Wot?"

The Chinese shook his basket. The seeds rustled dryly and gave off a smell of ashes.

"The Roosians have lots of seeds up top, in the nut. U-ukh... Lustling..."

"What's rustling?"

"Seeds, green ones..."

"What do you want then, rocks in their heads?"

The Chinese twitched his lips approvingly and asked, pointing at the grey field jacket of a paper-thin officer passing by:

"Who?"

"Captain Nezelasov, that's who he is, chink, commander of the armoured train. They're demanding the train be sent to the city and it's going. Will the partisans massacre us here, what do you think?"

"Good... Very good..."

"It's all good for you, but we've got to decide things here! "

A hazel-eyed fellow with a sack from which sparse bird's down stuck out stopped opposite the Chinese and cried cheerfully:

"Made your day's wages?"

The Chinese jumped up and went after the fellow.

The armoured train moved out on to the first track. The refugees looked greedily and wistfully at it from the platform and began whispering apprehensively. The Cossacks trudged by. A grey-haired, long-bearded old man wept by the hot-water tap and when he wiped away his tears it could be seen that his hands were small and quite white.

A soldier passed by, gazing round with curiosity and concealed joy, and glanced at a barrel filled with rancid smelling water the colour of rusty copper.

"That's life," he said affectionately.

Amid the kaoliang the Chinese whispered something to the hazel-eyed fellow.

XIX

At night it became utterly stifling. The breathless heat rushed in dense, invincible waves from the gloomy, iron-grey fields, from the forests—and, like warm water, it was felt by lips and with each intake of breath the chest was filled with a heavy gloom, like wet clay.

The dusk was short here, like a madman's thought. Darkness came instantly. The sky was filled with sparks. The sparks ran after the locomotive and the locomotive rent the rails and the darkness and howled helplessly and piteously.

From behind, the mountains and the forest came galloping up. They would gallop up and crush them, as a sheep would a beetle.

Ensign Obab always ate at such moments. He seized some eggs from a canvas bag, tore off the shells and stuffed bread, butter and meat into his mouth. He loved his meat half-raw and chewed it with his front teeth, dropping saliva as sticky as honey on the blanket. But the fever and hunger within him remained unchanged.

A batman diluted spirits with tea, brought baskets of provisions at stops and reported with puzzlement:

"There are no communications with the city, sir."

Obab did not speak, but would seize the basket and tear bread out of it. If he was unable to eat any more, he would voluptuously press and knead it, afterwards tossing it away.

Obab put the puppy on the floor and lying motionless, he followed it with dull, slow eyes. Sweat broke out on his body. It was especially unpleasant when his hair sweated.

The puppy, which was also sweaty, squealed. The axle-boxes squealed. Steel crashed, as if beneath the riveters.

Nezelasov, flaring up pitifully and quickly like a match in the wind, was mumbling in his compartment:

"We shall break through ... to the devil with them all! We don't need any headquarters... We don't give a damn! "

However, just as on the previous day, the armoured train seized verst after verst hurriedly and greedily, as Obab seized food—and was not satisfied. The huts of switchmen flashed past in just the same way and the city, incomprehensible and terrible in its silence, lived in the same way at the far end of the rails.

"We shall break through," the captain spat out hoarsely and ran to the engine-driver.

The engine-driver, swarthy-faced and impulsive, shouted at Nezelasov, waving his entire body:

"Be off! Be off! "

The captain, grimacing imperceptibly, enveloped the engine-driver in words:

"Keep calm ... there are no partisans here... And we shall break through, yes, no question of it... Increase speed... Er... All the same, we..."

The engine-driver, a volunteer from Ufa, was ashamed of his cowardice.

Stabbing his finger into the darkness, the stoker said:

"The needle's at the red line... Do you see?"

The captain looked at the engine-driver's smoke-blackened eyes and thought feverishly about the "red line". Beyond it the locomotive would blow up, would go out of its mind.

"All of us ... yes ... to the locomotive..."

There was an unpleasant smell of coal and oil.

The memory of rebelling workers came into Nezelasov's mind.

Suddenly he dashed from the locomotive and ran through the carriages, shouting:

"Shoot! "

Tightening their straps for some reason, the soldiers took their places by the machine-guns and loosed off into the darkness. Nezelasov was sickened by the familiar work of the guns.

Obab appeared. His lips were greasy and his forehead gleamed sweatily. He kept asking the same question:

"Are they firing? Are they firing?"

"As you were! " the captain ordered.

"Get some sleep, captain! "

Everything in the train was running and shouting—things and people alike. The grey puppy in Ensign Obab's compartment whined, too.

The captain hurried to light a cigarette.

"Go away ... to the devil! Stuff yourselves ... everything that you want... We'll do without you."

And he cried shrilly, drawing out the word:

"E-e-ensign! .."

"Sir," the ensign said, "are you looking for something?"

"We shall break through... I say that we shall break through! "

"Understood. We have everything necessary."

The captain lowered his voice:

"We have nothing. It's lost! We've got the beam of the scales... There's neither pans nor weights... Who shall we weigh and with what!"

"Just give me a chance and I'll ..."

The captain went into his compartment, mumbling as he went: "Er... These lands here ... the other side of the window... What do you ... now, while ... it ... curses you, eh?"

"Why are you dragging out that tapeworm? I don't like it. Make it shorter."

"We are corpses, ensign ... tomorrow's. You and I and everyone in the train—dust... We buried a man today, but tomorrow ... they'll be wielding spades for us ... yes."

"You should take some treatment."

The captain approached Obab. After taking a quick draught of air, he whispered:

"You don't treat steel, you have to reforge it... This is that ... steel that moves if it ... works... But if it is rusty ... I have been convinced all my life, all my life of something, but ... I was wrong, it seems... It's good to learn your mistakes just before you die... But I'm thi-irty years old, Obab. Thirty and I have a little kid—Va-a-alka... And he's got pink nails, Obab..."

Obab's thoughts, as blunt as the toe-cap of an American boot, were scattered. He lagged behind, returned to his compartment,

took a cigarette and then, while still not smoking, began to spit—first on the floor, then at the closed window, at the walls and on the blanket and when his mouth grew dry he sat down on the bed and stared dully at the wet, living bundle whining on the floor.

"Worm! "

XX

At dawn the captain ran into Obab's compartment.

Obab was lying face down, shoulders raised, as if shielding his head with them.

"Listen," the captain said indecisively, pulling at Obab's sleeve.

Obab turned, hurriedly hiding his back, as people hide the torn lining of a dress.

"Are they shooting? The partisans?"

"No, no... Listen! "

Obab's eyelids were swollen and damp from the heat and his eyes, like rents in a dress, gazed dull and frayed.

"But is there really no place for me ... among people, Obab? You see... I want to receive ... a letter. From home, understand! "

Obab said hoarsely:

"You should be asleep, go away! "

"I want ... to receive from home... But noone writes to me! I don't know a thing. You write to me at least, ensign! " The

captain tittered bashfully. "Well ... nobody'll know, er?"

Obab jumped up, drew on his great boots with trembling hands and then shouted hoarsely:

"Order me to do so in the line of duty, then! Otherwise, don't dare talk to me like that! I myself have ... in Barnaul *uezd*..."

The ensign drew himself up, as if on parade.

"Perhaps the guns haven't been cleaned? Perhaps I should give the order? The soldiers are drunk and here you are... You have no right..."

He waved his hands and said, drawing in his stomach:

"What have you got to do with me? I don't want to pity you, I don't want to! "

"I'm in agony, ensign... And you ... after all ... are a human being! "

"Your's is a rotten little life. You're a rotten person yourself... Practised self-abuse in childhood and... You, you wanted to be fondled, see...

"Understand me... Obab."

"This isn't in the line of duty."

"I beg you..."

The ensign shouted:

"I don't wa-a-ant to! .."

And he repeated these words several times and with each repetition they lost their coloration; something loud, rasping and terrible

broke from his throat, like a fleeing army:

"O-o-a-e-ggty! "

They did not listen to each other, but shouted frenziedly until they became hoarse and their voices dried up.

The captain sat down wearily on the cot and said bitterly, taking the puppy on his knees:

"I thought ... you ... a rock. It was about you... And now—a lollipop ... melted away in the heat! "

Obab threw open the window and leaped at the captain, abruptly grabbing the puppy by the scruff of its neck.

The captain hung on his arm and shouted:

"Don't dare! Don't you dare throw it out!"

The puppy yelped.

"Le-et me go-o! " Obab drew out the words in a thick, plaintive voice. "Le-et me..."

"No, I tell you! "

"Le-et me go-o! "

"Eno-ough! That's an order! "

Obab drew back his hand and went out, seeming deliberately to tread heavily.

The puppy whined quietly, picking its way unsurely on its grey paws over the floor and the grey blanket. It was like a wet, crawling spot.

"There, you poor thing," Nezelasov said and suddenly there was a bubbling in his throat and he felt a viscid moistness in his nose. He began to weep.

XXI

A bell rang in the compartment—the engine-driver was calling.

"Obab! "

Nezelasov's voice was tired.

Obab walked behind the captain, his tiny steps irritated him.

"There are no bridges cut here," Obab said. "What's the matter with them? Dismantled the sleepers... Partisans... And nothing from the city. Nonsense! "

"Marvellous ... how we live, eh?" Nezelasov said in a guilty voice. "I still don't know your name ... your patronymic, er... Just Obab? Excuse me, but for all the world ... like a dog's name..."

"My name is Semyon Avdeich. A master's name."

The engine-driver stood, as always, by the levers. He was a lean, sinewy person with copper moustaches and eyes that seemed smoke-blackened.

Pointing ahead, he said:

"There's a person lying there."

Nezelasov did not understand. The engine-driver repeated:

"There's a person on the track! "

Obab stuck out his head. The engine-driver quickly shifted some of the levers. The wind tore at Obab's hair.

"There's a person on the rails, sir! "

Nezelasov was irritated by the ensign's calm voice and said sharply:

"Stop the train! "

"I can't," the engine-driver said.

"That's an order! An..."

"It's impossible," the engine-driver repeated. "You came too late. We'll cut him in half and then stop."

"But that's a human being! Well?"

"According to instructions, I cannot stop. Otherwise there will be a crash."

Obab broke into laughter.

"There's no reason to make a complete stop. We've killed plenty of people—if we'd stopped for each one, we wouldn't have gone farther than Novo-Nikolaevsk."

The captain said irritably:

"Please refrain from giving instructions! Stop after running over the body! Please! "

"Yes, sir," Obab replied.

This answer, brusque and hasty, aroused the captain's fury still more and he said:

"You, Ensign Obab, go immediately and see that I receive a report concerning the nature of the corpse on the track."

"Yes, sir," Obab replied.

The engine-driver increased speed still further.

The carriages jerked tensely. The whistle burst forth shrilly.

The man on the rails lay motionless. The blue spot of his shirt could be seen on the

yellow sleepers.

The carriages shifted the iron shoulder-blades of their platforms.

"Finished," the engine-driver said. "Now I'll stop and we shall see."

Obab, unbuttoning the collar of his shirt to let the wind fan his sweaty body, jumped down from the top step right on to the ground. The engine-driver leaped after him.

Soldiers appeared at the doors. Nezelasov put on his cap and also walked towards a door.

But at that moment the armoured train was jolted by a resounding rifle salvo from the forest. And a moment later yet another stray shot came.

Ensign Obab stretched out his hands in front of him, as if about to dive into a river, and suddenly rolled heavily down the slope of the embankment.

The engine-driver stumbled and fell ponderously by the wheels of a carriage, like a sack falling from a cart. Blood gushed from his neck and his copper moustaches seemed instantly to turn white.

"Back! Back! " Nezelasov shrieked.

The doors of the carriages slammed, muffling the shots. A soldier, forgotten in the confusion, ran past the carriages. He was killed by the fourth carriage.

Machine-guns clattered.

RAILS

XXII

It looked as if he could not find a boot to fit and so ran about barefoot. The foxy-faced man's feet were enormous, like skis, but his body was small and weak, like a sheep's.

The foxy-faced man scurried and shouted, looking under his feet, as if driving chickens:

"Faster. Faster. They're waiting..."

And screwing up his eyes for some reason, he asked the passing detachments:

"How many men are there?"

Opening his eyes, he called out in a devil-may-care voice to Vershinin, who was standing on a hill:

"They're from Grishatino village, Nikita Yegorych! "

The trees were sparse at the foot of the hill and a big bare rock loomed among the pebbles. Beyond the rock, half a verst away to the east, there was sparse scrub and beyond the scrub the yellow railway embankment, like an endless grave without crosses.

"Mutyevka, Nikita Yegorych! " shouted the foxy-faced person.

Vershinin stood dark in the yellowing rumpled grass. He had a shaggy-haired, feral face, a gaze parched by long marches, weary hands. Pentefly Znobov, who was used to handling machines, felt calm and cheerful

standing near him. Znobov said:

"There are a lot of people on the march."

And he stretched his hand forward, as if grasping the lever of a well-oiled machine ready to move.

"Men from Anisimovo, from Sosnovka! "

Red-headed Vaska Okorok galloped up to the hill on a golden-haired, short-legged pacer and yelled, tickling the horse's neck with his boots:

"They're co-oming! Five thou' or so, probably! "

"More," the foxy-faced man responded confidently from the pebbles. "If I could read and write, I'd make out the entire list for you. A million! "

He shouted fiercely at the men who were passing:

"And what *volosts* do you come from?"

Long peasant's sacks of rusks were strapped to the squat Mongolian ponies and the men. Ripe autumn herbs stuck up in the manes of horses and men and their voices were drawn-out but harsh, like those of migrating autumn birds.

"Shall we hold one, then?" the foxy-faced man shouted. "They're waiting..."

And although everyone knew that an uprising had broken out in the city, that armoured train No. 14-69 was coming to the aid of the Whiteguards and that, if it were not detained, the Japanese would crush the uprising, ne-

vertheless a meeting had to be held and one had to speak and all to voice their support:

"We must go... Everyone must be told and everyone must know."

"The Japanese don't want to fight any more," Vershinin added, climbing down from the frame of the cart.

Sin Bin U scrambled on to the cart and for a long time, as if releasing a coloured and incomprehensibly rustling paper ribbon from his mouth, told the men why it was necessary for them to hold up the armoured train.

A dirty canvas of peasants' bodies, smelling of earth, was stretched between autumn trees painted gold and red copper. The canvas roared. And it was impossible to tell whether it was roaring in anger or in joy at the words of the men speaking from the cart.

"Shall we put it to the vote, then?" the fat headquarters secretary asked.

Vershinin replied:

"Wait. They haven't discussed yet."

A green-bearded old man with faded, stewed eyes straightened the shirt over his stomach, as if someone wanted to do reverence to it, and hissed furiously at Vershinin:

"And where are you going to from God, eh?"

"Go and cross yourself, grandpop! "

"You are destroying our faith, after all. I know! Saint Nicholas appeared and there won't be any more fish in the sea, he said. He

won't give them. And what are you stirring the people up for? I have to build a hut, but you have taken all my workers away."

"The Japanese will set fire to your hut! "

"I know the Japanese," the old man mumbled hastily, slobbering over his beard. "The Japanese want people to change to their faith. Well, but the people are like a log of wood: they don't understand. But we shouldn't bring down misfortune on ourselves, we should up and agree to it, the devil with them—you can ... to your own God ... on the quiet ... Nicholas won't forgive his own, but you can always pull the wool over the eyes of the Japanese..."

The old man shook his head, as if butting through a wall of darkness, and the words he spoke were evidently born of great effort, but Vershinin did not need them.

And the old man, his saliva dribbling through his feeble lips as if from a rusty bucket, began mumbling his opinions again.

"Be off! " Vershinin said roughly. "What are you shoving your gods up my nose for? Gods, my foot... So long as there's life..."

"Don't blaspheme, monster, don't blaspheme! "

Okorok said furiously:

"Punch the bastard in the teeth, Yegorych! Tuppenny-ha'penny provocateurs! "

Jumping on to the frame of the cart, Okorok shouted, drawing out his words:

"Well, what do you think, comrades? Shall we have a vote, then?"

"Vote! " someone replied timidly from the crowd.

The peasants hummed:

"Get on with it! "

"What is there to think about, then! "

"Come on,Vaska! "

When they had voted, deciding to attack the armoured train, an uneven roar, as if a cliff had collapsed into a ravine, was heard far away to the left. Smoke was thrown up into the sky, looking like an enormous, shaggy besom.

The fat secretary removed his cap and told the peasants, as if reading the minutes:

"Headquarters has resolved this—our forces have blown up the bridge over the Muklenka. That means the train won't get to the city anyway. Probably about five of our men were killed..."

The peasants removed their caps and crossed themselves for the repose of the souls of the fallen. They went through the forest towards the railway embankment to dig trenches.

Vershinin walked through the scrub to the embankment, climbed it and firmly planted his feet on the ground between the sleepers, as if nailing them there, looking for a long time westward at the distant gleaming steel strips.

"What's up with you?" Znobov asked.

Vershinin turned and said as he climbed down from the embankment:

"Will people really live good lives after us?"

"Well?"

"That's all."

Znobov parted his moustaches with his fingers and said with enjoyment:

"That's their business. I think they have to, the bastards! "

XXIII

The clean-shaven, short-legged man leaned the upper part of his body on the table—apparently his legs would not support him—and said hoarsely:

"That way is impossible, Comrade Peklevanov: your revolutionary committee takes no account whatever of the opinion of the Soviet of unions. Your action was premature."

One of the workers sitting on a chair in the corner said peevishly:

"The Japanese have declared that they will maintain their neutrality. We won't wait, though, for them to clear off back to their islands. We must take power into our own hands, then they'll go quickly enough."

The short-legged man argued:

"The Soviet of unions has nothing against you, comrades, but you could wait..."

"The Japs might put in someone else again."

"Will they move again to put down the peasants?"

"We've waited long enough! "

The meeting became excited. Peklevanov, who was sipping tea, spoke soothingly:

"Quieten down, now, comrades."

The short-legged representative of the Soviet of unions protested:

"You take no account of the present moment. True, the peasants are fanatically-minded, but... You have already sent agitators around the district, the peasants are advancing on the city, the Japanese are taking a neutral position... That's true! Vershinin can even hold up the armoured train, but all the same there won't be an uprising here."

"Show him! "

"That's demagoguery! "

"I request the floor! "

"Comrades! "

Peklevanov rose, pulled a document from his brief-case and he said, his face flushing:

"Permit me to read the following: 'In accordance with a resolution of the Soviet of People's Commissars of Siberia, the uprising is set for twelve pm on September 16, 1919. The uprising will have its inception at the barracks of the artillery division... On the signal... the Soviet of People's..."

As he left, the short-legged man said to Peklevanov:

"They are after us! Be more careful... And you should not have sent the sailor to the district on a mission."

"Why not?"

"He's an unstable person: heaven knows what he could shoot his mouth off about! People need to be chosen now with caution."

"He knows the peasants well," Peklevanov said.

"Noone knows the peasants. He's hot, and impulsiveness, it's true, does have an effect on them. All the same... Are you going to the meeting?"

"Where?"

"The ship-yard. The workers want to see you."

Peklevanov blushed.

The short-legged man came up close to him and said quietly, speaking directly to his face:

"You have my sympathy. But without you they don't want to act. They don't believe in words, they want to see the person. We're followed ... counter-intelligence ... when we're caught, we're shot—but they want to see our faces. Is he really with us, that's to say. You're instigating an uprising for nothing."

Peklevanov wiped his sweaty, freckled brow, thrust his small hands into the pockets

of his short jacket and began to pace the room. The short-legged man followed him from beneath his convex spectacles.

"Sentimentality," Peklevanov said, "nothing will happen! "

The short-legged man sighed:

"As you wish. So, shall we come for you?"

"When?"

Peklevanov's colour deepened and he thought: "It's for himself he's afraid".

And he became completely confused by this thought and his hands even trembled.

"It's all the same to me. Whenever you like! "

In the evening the short-legged man drove up to the front garden and waited. His straw hat and his moustache, which was yellowish and clipped and resembled a tooth-brush, were visible through the bushes. The horse snorted.

Peklevanov's wife wept. She had sharp teeth and a ruddy face. Tears had no place on it and it was unpleasant to see them on the pink cheeks and the soft chin.

"You've worn me out. Every day I wait for you to be arrested... God knows what will happen then... If only that were all! Don't go! "

She ran about the room, then flung herself at the door and grabbed the handle, begging:

"I shan't let you go... Who will return you to me when vou are shot? The revolutionary

committee? I don't give a damn for any of them, idiots."

"Manya! Semyonov is waiting."

"He's a scoundrel—nothing more. I shan't let you go, I tell you, I don't want to! We-ell?"

Peklevanov looked round and went to the door. His wife was bent over, like a tree in the wind; the tendons were stretched under the wet skin of her bent arm.

Peklevanov moved away embarrassedly towards the window.

"I don't understand you!

"You don't love anyone... Neither me, nor yourself, Vasenka! Don't go! "

The short-legged man said hoarsely from the droshky:

"Vassily Maximych, will you be long? Otherwise it will get dark and the shops will be shut."

Peklevanov said quietly:

"You should be ashamed, Manya. Am I supposed to jump out of a window? I cannot refuse; it will be said that I have cold feet."

"But you are going to your death. I shan't let you."

Peklevanov patted his short, sparse hair.

"You must."

Fumbling in the pockets of his short jacket and smiling crookedly, he began to climb on to the window-sill.

"What nonsense this is... This isn't the way..."

His wife covered her face with her hands and weeping loudly, as if deliberately, ran out of the room.

"Shall we go?" the short-legged man asked. He sighed.

Peklevanov thought he heard crying in the house. Clumsily, he thrust his hand into his pocket, but his cigarette-case was not there. It would be shameful to go back.

"Do you have any cigarettes?" he asked.

XXIV

Nikita Vershinin was skirting the bushes by the railway embankment astride a big-bellied, shaggy horse like a bearhunting Medelyansk dog.

The men lay in the bushes, smoking and preparing themselves for a long wait. The brightly-coloured dots of their shirts sprouted in dozens and hundreds between the sidings, on both sides of the embankment for almost ten versts.

The horse was lazy. It had a sack for a saddle. Vershinin's legs dangled and his boot rubbed his heel painfully through a lumpy footcloth.

"See that there are no women," he said.

The detachment leaders drew themselves up and asked briskly, as if calming their nerves by their military bearing:

"Is there any news from the city, Nikita Yegorych?"

"An uprising has begun there."

"And what successes have there been? Military ones."

Vershinin struck his horse in the stomach with his heel and rode off, conscious of a sleepy tiredness in his body.

"There have been great successes, lad. The main thing is for us not to louse things up."

The men lined up along the embankment, as if at haymaking. They waited.

The embankment was becoming strangely and mysteriously empty. During the last few days train after train of refugees and soldiers—Japanese, American and Russian—had rolled east. Somewhere, the thread had snapped and people had been thrown back in the other direction. It was said that the peasants who had come from the hills were robbing the refugees and the soldiers felt envious. Armoured train No. 14-69 was rushing along between the stations alone, preventing them from abandoning everything and fleeing.

The partisan staff was in session in a pointsman's hut. The pointsman stood miserably by the telephone and asked the station:

"Will the train arrive soon?"

Near him sat a calm-faced partisan with a revolver, his eyes glued on the pointsman.

Vaska Okorok was making fun of the pointsman:

"We'll make you a camp cook. Don't be frightened! "

And he pointed to the telephone, saying:

"They say that in Petersburg Bolshevik scientists talk with the moon! "

"If it's a fact, it's a fact."

The men sighed and glanced at the embankment.

"Truth will even get to the stars."

The staff was waiting for the armoured train. Five hundred peasants had been sent to the bridge and logs had been brought to the embankment on long Russian carts to prevent the armoured train from withdrawing. Crowbars lay by the sleepers—for dismantling the rails.

Znobov said with dissatisfaction:

"Truth, that's all we hear about! But what it's for we don't know. What do you want to talk with the moon for, Vaska! "

"Curious, all the same! We might want to settle a man there."

The men chuckled.

"Windbag."

"We need every man we can get here and he talks about the moon! How shall we take the armoured train, the devil?"

"We'll take it anyway! "

"It isn't one of your squirrels—you can't just knock it off a pine tree! "

At this moment Vershinin arrived. He entered, breathing heavily, dumped his cap on the table and said to Znobov:

"Will it come soon?"

"They don't answer," the pointsman at the telephone said.

The men sat in silence. One of them began to talk about hunting. Znobov recalled the chairman of the revolutionary committee in the city.

"That tow-haired fellow, you mean?" the man who had been talking about hunting asked and immediately began yarning about Peklevanov, that his face was whiter than finest wheaten flour, that the women were after him like a horse after oats and that the American minister had offered him seven hundred billion to convert to the American faith, but Peklevanov had proudly replied: "We would not accept you into our faith for all the world".

"The bastard! " the men said delightedly.

For some reason Znobov enjoyed listening to this rubbish and wished himself he had something to tell. Vershinin took off his boots and began to change his footcloths. Suddenly the pointsman asked timidly into the receiver:

"When? Five-twenty?"

Turning to the men he said:

"It's coming! "

And, as if the train were already by the

hut, everyone ran out, slinging their rifles over their shoulders and climbing on to the carts, and were off eastward, towards the demolished bridge.

"We'll be there in time! " Okorok said.

A messenger was sent ahead.

They looked at the rails, gleaming dully among the trees.

"We should take them up, that's all."

From a neighbouring cart came the answer:

"That's out. And who will lay them again?"

"Us, brother, right there on the train!"

"We'll roll into the city! "

"And he wants us to lay rails."

Okorok shouted:

"But after all, brothers, they have people! "

"Who?"

"The Nezelasovs, haven't they? People who repair the rails—right?"

"You're a fool, Vaska, and what if we kill them? All of them?"

And they agreed, their enthusiasm aroused:

"We can do that... We'll kill them! "

"No, then there'll be no-one to lay the sleepers."

They were constantly looking back to see whether the armoured train was coming. They hid themselves in the forest, for people were a rare sight along the line now that the armoured train kept sweeping back and forth, raking the woods with bullets.

Their hearts thumped fearfully and they

lashed at their horses, driving them on, as if cover were waiting for them at the bridge.

Some two versts away from the pointman's hut on the embankment, they saw a man on horseback.

"He's one of ours! " Znobov cried.

Vaska took aim.

"I'll get him. One of ours—is he?"

"What the hell are you talking about, if he was one of ours I wouldn't have taken aim! "

Sin Bin U, who was sitting beside Vaska, restrained him:

"Hold on, Vasika-a! "

"Wait! " Znobov shouted.

The man on the horse came closer. It was the scrawny fellow with the bandaged cheek, who had brought the American.

"Is Nikita Yegorych here?"

"Well?"

The man shouted joyfully:

"We got there, but the Cossacks were ahead of us. Right by the bridge! We shot them and then came back."

"How did they get there?"

Vershinin rode up to the man and looked him over, asking:

"Did you kill them all?"

"Every one, Nikita Yegorych. Five—God rest their souls! "

"And where were the Cossacks from?"

The man slapped his horse's mane.

"But the bridge wasn't blown up, you see, Nikita Yegorych. It's still in one piece."

"Tell us another! " the man yelled.

"Provocateur! "

"Bash his mug! "

The scrawny fellow hurriedly crossed himself.

"There, it isn't blown up as God's my witness. They blew themselves up about three hundred sazhens away, by a rock. Maybe they thought of trying out the dynamite. All we found was one trouser-leg and some flesh, but all the rest... Gone."

The men were silent. They urged their horses forward. However, suddenly they stopped. Vaska, his face distorted, cried:

"But the train will go away! To the city! Brothers! "

The crowd of men who had been sent ahead poured from the forest. One of them said:

"There are logs there, piled up by the bridge, on the embankment, Nikita Yegorych. The men are firing back at the Cossacks. Well, there aren't many of them."

"Shall we go there, to the bridge?" Znobov requested.

For some reason everyone looked round simultaneously at this moment. A thin cloud of smoke was spreading over the forest.

"It's coming! " Okorok said.

Znobov, furiously striking his horse with his whip, repeated:

"It's coming! "

The peasants repeated:

"It's coming! "

"Comrades! " Okorok's voice rang out. "It must be stopped! "

They tumbled from the cart and dashed towards the embankment, seizing their rifles. The horses moved away into the grass and grazed, waving their bridles.

The men ran up to the embankment. They lay down on the sleepers and inserted cartridge clips. They made ready.

The rails groaned quietly—the armoured train was on the move.

Znobov whispered:

"It'll cut us in two, that's all. It won't even fire! "

And suddenly, becoming aware of this, the men quietly slid down into the bushes, leaving the embankment deserted once again.

The smoke thickened. It was rent by the wind, but it crawled stubbornly over the forest.

"It's coming! It's coming! " The men ran shouting towards Vershinin.

Vershinin and the entire headquarters staff lay, wet and ashamed, in the bushes. Vaska Okorok beat his fist angrily against the ground. The Chinese sat on his heels and tore at the grass.

"If we had a body! " Znobov said tensely.

"What for?"

"Because according to law a train has to stop if it runs over a body. To make out a report... evidence and all that! "

"Well?"

"So, if we had a corpse, we'd lay it on the rails, the train would run over it and stop and then, when the engine-driver got out, we'd shoot him. We could take the train then."

The smoke grew thicker. The train whistle sounded.

Vershinin jumped up and shouted:

"Comrades, who wants ... to lie on the rails and be run over? We're going to snuff it anyway. Well? Those of us here will kill the engine-driver! And anyway, it's more likely that it will stop before reaching the man."

The men raised their heads and looked at the embankment, which resembled a grave mound.

"Comrades! " Vershinin shouted.

The men were silent.

Vaska threw his rifle aside and scrambled up the embankment.

"Where are you going?" Znobov cried.

"Just go to...! Bastards..." Vaska snarled angrily.

And stretching out his arms along his body, he lay down across the rails.

The trees were already breathing and moaning. Yellow-scarlet smoke, like foam, had torn itself free and was leaping over the tree-tops.

Vaska turned over on to his stomach. The

sleepers smelled of pitch. Vaska made a little mound of sand on a sleeper and laid his cheek on it. The sand was warm and large-grained.

The men mumbled indistinctly in the bushes, like wind in the leaves. The rails hummed in the forest...

Vaska rose his head and quietly directed a question towards the bushes:

"Is there any moonshine to drink? My throat's burning! "

A straw-bearded fellow crawled forward on all fours with a ladle of moonshine. Vaska drank and placed the ladle beside him.

Then he raised his head and, brushing the sand from his cheeks, gazed at the blue trees humming and the blue rails ringing.

He half-raised himself on his elbows. His face tightened into a single yellow wrinkle and his eyes were like two scarlet tears...

"I ca-an't. My so-oul! "

The men were silent.

The Chinese threw aside his rifle and crawled up the embankment.

"Where are you going?" Znobov asked.

Without turning round Sin Bin U said:

"So-orry! Vasika! "

And he lay down beside Vaska.

His yellow face wrinkled and grew dark, like an autumn leaf. The rail sobbed. Whether someone slid down the slope and whether the bushes received him Sin Bin U neither knew nor saw...

"I ca-an't! Bro-others! " Vaska howled, sliding down.

The grass was slobbered over, the sky was slobbered over...

Sin Bin U was alone.

His flat, emerald-eyed head, like a cobra's, felt the sleepers, pulled away from them and was raised, wagging, above the rails... It looked round.

Silent men's heads with expectant, hungry eyes pushed up the bushes.

Sin Bin U lay down.

And the emerald-eyed cobra stretched itself still further upwards and several hundred more heads stirred the bushes and looked at him.

The Chinese lay down again.

The straw-bearded scrawny fellow shouted to him:

"Chuck that ladle over here, manza! And that 'volver, too. What do you need it for, eh? It would have come in useful for me! "

Sin Bin U pulled out his revolver without raising his head, waved has hand as if about to throw the weapon into the bushes, and suddenly shot himself in the back of the head.

The body of the Chinese slumped and clung to the rails.

The pine trees flung the armoured train out. It was grey, square, and the eyes of the steam-engine gleamed malicious and crim-

son. A grey mould covered the sky; the trees were like a sky-blue cloth...

And the corpse of the Chinese Sin Bin U, pressed close to the ground, was listening to the hollow ring of the rails...

THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN NEZELASOV

XXV

Ensign Obab was left lying by the embankment, in the grass.

Captain Nezelasov was in his compartment, in the locomotive, in the carriages. And no one thought that he was hurrying, although, swallowing the words, he kept saying:

"Come on! Come on! "

The engine-driver's mate came running to replace the driver. As he fumbled with the levers, wiping his hands on his oil-stained jacket, he said:

"Right now ... if you stop watching me! "

The water taps began to boil.

As he searched for a chisel in the locomotive's tool-box the thin-necked man banged his head and cried out suddenly with pain.

Nezelasov, bending over, fled.

"Damn... The devil with you..."

The train hurried towards the bridge, but lying there on the rails, three versts

short of the bridge, were logs and an enormous larch. And the bridge looked as if it had been blown up.

The armoured train, its buffers clanking, leaped backwards and rushed towards the station with a howl. But at the bend into the forest, where Obab had been killed, the sleepers had been taken up...

And Captain Nezelasov, too, like an enormous pendulum, dashed back and forth on the straight track over a distance that measured six versts from the bridge to the pointsman's hut.

The machine-guns fired, the carriages spat machine-gun fire, the machine-guns were hot, like blood...

Badly wounded partisans could be seen bobbing up out of the bushes. They were not afraid to be seen now.

But those who were alive could not be seen, the golden-grey bushes were still bent over and in the depths the cedars were dark. Sometimes the armoured train alone seemed to be firing.

Nezelasov could not make out the faces of the soldiers in the train. The lights were dying down and the men's faces seemed lighter than the yellow flame.

Nezelasov's body acted submissively, his throat shouted resonantly and a little sharply and his left hand squeezed something in the air.

He wanted to shout something consoling

to the soldiers, but he thought: "They know that themselves! "

And again he was conscious of a feeling of fury with Ensign Obab.

At night the partisans lit bonfires. They burned with an enormous milky-yellow flame and because it was dangerous to approach and throw wood into the fire they tossed wood from a distance and the bonfires seemed wide, the size of peasants' huts. The armoured train ran among these bonfires and its machine-guns and cannon intensified their fire at the flames. Bonfires burned on both sides of the track and there was noone to be seen and the shots from the taiga were like the crackle of burning damp wood. The captain imagined that his body was too heavy and was over-loading one end of the train and ran to the middle; he thought that the engine-driver would go over to the partisans and then, in the engine-driver's cab he thought that behind him the soldiers were uncoupling the moving carriages.

Trying to seem stern, the captain said:

"Cartridges ... tell you ... don't spare! "

And, to console himself, he shouted to the engine-driver:

"I am telling you, can't you hear? Don't spare the cartridges! "

Turning away, he laughed quietly to himself on the other side of the door and shook his left hand:

"The most important thing, captain ... stereotyped phrases ... 'Don't spare the cartridges'."

The captain seized a rifle and himself tried firing into the darkness, but he remembered that a commander was necessary to give orders and not as a fighting unit. He felt his shaven chin and reflected hurriedly: "But what am I necessary for?"

However, the thought immediately came: "It would be fine for the captain to fall in love ... to grow a beard half an arshin long! A general's daughter ... a career ... Don't dare! "

He ran to the middle of the train.

"Don't dare without orders! "

Without orders from the captain the armoured train rushed from the bridge—a small wooden bridge across a stream which the partisans, for some reason, had not been able to blow up—beyond the pointsman's hut, but coming closer and closer, like the two screw-propellers, logs were sliding over the rails and behind the logs were partisans.

Bullets struck the logs and the partisans fired back.

The armoured train, blind, fearing to stumble, breasted the bullets, but behind the walls of steel soldiers were already running from carriage to carriage, changing place, firing weapons not their own, wiping their sweaty chests and saying:

"Forgive us, Lord! "

Nezelasov was afraid of showing himself to the engine-driver. As if behind the steel walls, his thoughts ran from place to place, and, when something necessary had to be said, the captain shouted:

"Swine! "

And the necessary word throbbed for a long time in his legs and in his elbows, which were covered with goose flesh.

The captain ran to his compartment. The brown puppy slept curled up in a ball on the bed.

The captain waved his hand:

"I said ... neither shells ... nor pity! But these are swine ... swine! "

He stamped on the spot and banged his palm on the pillow; the puppy jumped off, opened its mouth wide and began to whine feebly.

The captain bent down and listened to it.

"Ee-ee-ee..." the puppy squeaked.

The captain grabbed it, stuck it under his armpit and ran with it along the carriages.

The soldiers did not glance round at the captain. His familiar wide but flat figure, now somehow transparent, like poor cigarette-paper, ran past with a quiet yelp. To the soldiers it seemed that the captain, not the puppy, was yelping. And they were not surprised.

But it was the puppy that yelped, weakly

scratching at the catpain's field jacket with its soft paws.

Without subsiding, the machine-guns still had been firing for more than six hours on end at the grass, into the trees, into the darkness and at the rocks reflected in the bonfires. Why the partisans fired at the steel armour of the carriages, knowing that bullets would not pierce it, was impossible to tell.

The captain was conscious of a feeling of tiredness when his hand found his head. His boots, dry and hard, as if made of wood, pinched severely.

The ceiling revolved, the walls buckled and there was a smell of burnt flesh—where from, why? And the steam engine droned without ceasing:

"A-a-o-e-e-ee."

XXVI

The peasants continued to arrive in an unending flow. They left their carts in the forest with their wives and walked along paths to the forest edge with rifles on their shoulders. From there they crawled towards the embankment and dug trenches.

The women, wailing, met the wounded and carried them away. Those who had sufficient strength swore at the women, but the seriously wounded bounced on the tree roots. Their raw flesh was laid bare to the air and the fall-

ing leaves. The leaves stuck to the blood on the spattered carts.

A small, pockmarked old woman with a ladle of holy water walked about the clearing, sprinkling it on those passing. They crawled along, turned towards her and went on past her quietly, like a flock of well-fed sheep returning from the field.

On a cart behind the pointsman's hut Vershinin listened to the reports which the fat secretary read to him.

Vaska Okorok whispered fearfully:

"Are you afraid, Nikita Yegorych?"

"What of?" Vershinin asked hoarsely.

"There's an awful lot of people! "

"What have you got to be afraid of—you're not a horse thief. There's nothing strange about it—the people have come! "

After the death of the Chinese Vaska had shrivelled and begun to look everyone in the face with a feeble, guilty smile.

"They're moving slowly, Nikita Yegorych; there's something wrong with my inside."

"Just shut up and it will pass! "

Znobov said:

"It's many nights we haven't slept, but you, Vaska, the red-haired devil, it's all right with you."

Vaska sighed softly:

"They say that in some country or other red-headed men aren't conscripted. I served the tsar, though, for seven years if you work it

out: four years active service and three years of the German war."

"It's a good thing the bridge wasn't blown up..." Znobov said.

"What?" Vaska asked.

"How would we have driven the armoured train to the city? We didn't even want to take up the sleepers, and all of a sudden they were going to blow the bridge up. Dimwits! "

Vaska drew his curly head down between his shoulders and raised his collar.

"I'm sorry for that Chinese, Znobov! But I think he'll go to heaven—he suffered for the Christian faith."

"What a fool you are, Vaska."

"Why?"

"You believe in God."

"Don't you?"

"Not in any of them! "

"You're a swine, Znobov. Anyway, that's your business. We've got freedom now, you can please yourself. Only I couldn't live without religion—all my family have been Old-believers for centuries. Schismatics."

"Bel-ieve-ers! "

Znobov roared with laughter.

"At least let me do some shooting, Nikita Yegorych! " Vaska sighed miserably.

"Not allowed. Since you are a member of the staff, you'll have to remain at headquarters."

"This cart! "

The glass pane in the pointsman's hut rang and fell to the ground with a soft jingling. A shell had fallen nearby.

Vershinin suddenly became furious and thumped the secretary.

"Stay put. And when it gets dark, light fires. Otherwise they'll leave the train and clear off into the forest or God knows what."

Vershinin urged his horse along by the railway track after the fugitive armoured train:

"You won't get away."

His horse, as shaggy as a dog, shook its large, barrel-like belly. The cart jerked. Vershinin stood up and tightened the reins:

"Giddiyap! "

The horse flexed its legs, swished its tail and dashed off. Znobov, his portly frame bobbing, held tight to the sides of the cart and tried to restrain Vershinin.

"Slow down—you won't catch it up! And if you did, your life wouldn't be worth a brass farthing."

"There's nowhere for it to go. Come o-on! "

He lashed his horse's sweaty back.

"Come on! " Vaska shouted. "The whole staff is reviewing the troops! To hell with this captain and his train. Whip up your horse, Yegorych! Come on! "

The cart raced past the men in their trenches. They rose to their knees and silently followed the man standing in the cart with

their eyes, then held their rifles ready and waited for the train speeding past them to fire at it.

The armoured train was rushing towards them with a rumble and a sound of shots.

Vaska screwed up his eyes shut.

"It's firing high," Znobov said. "Look, the shots are falling short. They must have gone out of their minds in there, they can't see a thing! "

"Not a damned thing," Vaska yelled furiously and, seizing a switch, began to lash the horse.

Vershinin, his hulking figure towering, his brows jumping on his wet face, shouted:

"Don't let us down, comrades! "

"Come on! " Vaska yelled.

The cart rattled, a cask knocked against the wheels and straw thrown out by the jolts spilled on the ground. The men in the bushes replied in an unmilitary way:

"Never mind! "

These words seemed forceful and familiar to them, and even Znobov flung himself on his knees and shouted, waving his rifle:

"Come on, lad, whip up your horse, it's all in the lap of the gods now! "

Again the armoured train, no longer terrible, was rushing towards them and Vaska threatened it with his fist:

"We'll settle you! "

Among the silent bonfires the grey boxes

of carriages rushed to and fro in the darkness with a rumble.

The hairy man on the cart gave orders. The men dragged logs to the embankment and crawled slowly forwards, pushing them in front. The armoured train approached and struck the logs point-blank.

The logs were like corpses and the corpses like logs—branches and arms crackled and both trees and people had young and healthy bodies.

The sky was dark and heavy, hammered out of cast-iron, and it roared from above with a hollow locomotive's howl.

The men crossed themselves, loaded their rifles and pushed the logs forward. The logs smelt of pitch and the men of sweat.

The firs were like lances and snapped, fragile, on the armour of the train.

Vaska, sprawling back across the cart, laughed:

"Don't like it, eh, you swine. We'll settle accounts with you brother. You won't get away. We let you have the Chinese for nothing! "

"Tomorrow their water will run out," Znobov calculated. "We'll take them. That's certain."

"We shall have to go into the city to lend a hand," Vershinin said.

Like ripe fruit in the wind, men fell and kissed the earth with a parting kiss.

Arms no longer gave support; the entire

body fell softly and was hurt no more—the earth took pity. At first men fell in dozens. The women wept quietly in a cutting beyond the forest edge. Then they fell in hundreds—and the wailing rose higher and higher. There was noone to carry the bodies away and the corpses hindered the men hauling up logs.

Men continued to scramble up the embankment in an endless stream.

The armoured train went on tirelessly chewing and made ever shorter runs from the pointsman's hut to the wooden bridge over the stream, as if losing its way in the smoke from the deserted bonfires. Then in stopped.

It was at that moment, well before Vershinin's cry: "Come on! Co-omra-ades! " that the men launched an assault.

Small pieces of lead and copper, tearing themselves away from the steel walls, fell on bodies, tearing chests, piercing them through and joining them with death for ever.

"O-a-a-a-o!! " the peasants roared.

The grass crawled over chest and stomach. Faces caught on the twigs of branches, beards became tangled and torn, lips emerged from their sweaty, wet hair:

"O-a-a-a-o-o!! "

The bonfires were behind them and the dark carriages, looking like barns, were close, but there was no way to the people hiding fearfully behind the steel walls.

A partisan threw a bomb at the wheels. It burst, echoing in everyone's breast.

The men withdrew.

Dawn broke.

When, in the light they saw the corpses, there was a yell as if the men had had the skin torn simultaneously from their backs and they returned to the attack.

Vershinin took off his boots and went barefoot. Znobov crawled, often squatting and almost on hands and knees, for some reason cautiously skirting the bushes. Vaska Okorok looked admiringly at Vershinin and shouted:

"My, you are a hero, Nikita Yegorych! "

Vaska's face was cheerful, only tears gleamed in his eyes.

The armoured train hooted.

"Shut its mouth! " Okorok cried shrilly, then suddenly rose from his knees and clutched at his chest, saying in the thin voice offended children use: "My God ... me, too! "

He fell.

The partisans, not looking at Vaska, scrambled to the high, yellow embankment, which looked like an enormous grave.

Vaska jerked spasmodically all over, as always hurrying somewhere. And died.

The partisans withdrew.

Peklevanov arrived at dawn. He had some leaflets in his brief-case. One lense of his spectacles was broken in half.

XXVII

Wet with sweat, the soldiers cooled the machine-guns by the loop-holes, clinking water-cans. The hurried movements of their scratched hands, were timid.

The train shook convulsively and was hot all over, like a man sick with typhus and in delirium.

A dark purple fog filled the head of Captain Nezelasov with fluttering clots. From his temples a hot, shuddering tremor that jarred upon his body moved and settled by his heart in a prickly triangle, the blunt end downwards.

"Swine! " the captain shouted.

A cavalry carbine was there in his hands, heaven knew, how, and its bolt was amazingly warm and soft. Nezelasov ran through the carriages, catching the stock on the doors.

"Swine! " he shouted shrilly. "Swine! "

It was a shame that he could not find a word that would resemble a command; curses seemed to him most appropriate and most easily remembered.

The men attacked the train.

Through the loop-holes humped backs could be seen running to and fro among the distant bushes, which were like matted yellow wool, and to the side of them rifles could be glimpsed, resembling small boards. Behind the bushes were the woods and, al-

ways unexpected, the fat, dark-green hills, which looked like breasts. But more fearful than the enormous hills were the backs rushing to and fro, resembling pieces of bark. The soldiers felt this fear and drowned the hoarse roar from the bushes with machine-guns so that it should not be heard. The machine-guns fired on the bushes without wearying, impossible to be compared with anything or anyone. Captain Nezelasov ran past his compartment several times. For some reason he was frightened to go in; a lithographed portrait of General Kolchak, a map of the European theatre of war and the little cast-iron god that served as an ash-tray could be seen through the doors. The captain felt that, once in the compartment, he would burst into tears and hide himself away somewhere in a corner, like that puppy whining somewhere, and never come out.

The men were on the attack.

It was shameful to admit, but he did not know how many attacks there had been and he could not ask the soldiers—their eyes were filled with such fury. They had been fixed on the bolts of their rifles and the cartridge belts of the machine-guns and it was impossible to tear those eyes away unscathed—they would kill you. The captain ran between them and the carbine, knocking against the top of his boot, was as light as a reed. The armoured train had entered the night now and the dark-

ness reluctantly admitted the heavy steel boxes. The thought occurred in fragments to the captain that he could hear the noise of the wind in the forest... The soldiers sullenly fired rifles and machine-guns into the darkness. The machine-guns seemed slashing at an enormous, frenziedly yelling body. A pale-haired soldier was pouring paraffin into a lamp. The paraffin had long been running over his knees and the captain, stopping near him, caught the light scent of apples.

"The puppy must be ... given water!" Nezelasov said hurriedly.

The pale-haired man obediently stuck out his lips and called:

"N'akh ... n'akh ... n'akh..."

Another man with arms that were thin but terribly short was re-wrapping his foot-cloths. Raising his foot-cloth, he sniffed the air for a long time and said to the captain very quietly:

"Paraffin, your excellency. In our village paraffin costs one *kerenka* a pound..."

...There were many of them, many... And for some reason all of them had to die and to lie near the armoured train in the bushes, which were like yellow, matted wool.

Bonfires were lit. They burned evenly, like candles, barely trembling and those throwing wood on them could not be seen. The hills were burning.

"Stone does not burn! "

"It does! "

"It does! "

Again an attack.

Someone ran towards the train and fell. Someone else ran back and again dashed forward.

"Is this an attack?"

Nonsense.

They would lie for a while, the men in the bushes, stand up, run back and then dash again.

They run forward!

Through the machine-guns, past the small ringing muzzles, a dense stone roar rushed and fell in the carriages:

"O-o-oo-o-o! "

And thinly, so thinly:

"Oy... Oy! "

A soldier with sunken cheeks said:

"They're wailing ... they've got women about them there, in the taiga! "

And he sank down on a bench.

A bullet struck him in the ear and tore a hole the size of a fist on the other side of his head.

"Why can we be seen in the darkness?" Nezelasov said. "There are bonfires there, but here it should be dark. And the smoke—they're smoking us out, do you feel it?"

Bonfires in the darkness and beyond them the howling of the women. But perhaps the hills were howling?

"Nonsense! The hills are burning! "

"No, that's nonsense, too, that's the bonfires burning! "

A machine-gunner, his side scorched, wept like a child.

An old volunteer, bearded like a priest, shot him with his pistol.

The captain wanted to cry out, but for some reason kept silent, only touching his dry, paper-like, thin eyelids. The captain has a fiancée in the town ... now she must be...

The carbine became heavier, but he felt without comprehending why he had to drag it around with him.

Captain Nezelasov's skin was white and soft and his eyes lay on it like flowers embroidered on silk.

The night was already passing. Soon the sun would rise. His fiancée was reading a book. His fiancée had fallen asleep over the book. The eyelids of the woman were damp from sleep...

The pale-haired soldier slept by his machine-gun, but the gun, drowsy, kept firing. Although perhaps it was not his machine-gun firing, but that of a neighbour. Or the neighbour's machine-gun slept and the neighbour shouted:

"That way! That way! "

And what book could be read on this night?

Pain stretched from throat to chin, as if

the skin was being scratched off with a nail. And suddenly, near his face, Nezelasov saw his thin hands, shaking, with long, dirty nails.

Later he forgot about this. He forgot much that night... Something had to be forgotten, otherwise it was hard to keep everything ... hard...

And suddenly there was silence...

There, beyond the carriage-doors, in the bushes.

Have to sleep. Morning, apparently, or maybe evening. All the days don't have to be remembered...

There was no shooting there, in the hills. By the embankment the men lay, quiet and smeared with blood. Of course, it was uncomfortable for them to lie there.

But here there was darkness before the eyes. The captain had gone blind.

It was from the silence...

Both his eyes and his soul had gone blind. It even seemed cheerful.

But suddenly everyone felt, at first faintly, then as if it were scorching them, that the silence was impossible to bear.

The pale-haired soldier, raising his arms, ran to the door.

Darkness! In the darkness his raised arms could not be seen.

And instantly the captain felt that men from all seven of the carriages had flung themselves at the doors. It was easier to keep one's

feet on sand. And one could flee somewhere... People were choking from the smoke in the steel boxes... They were stifled!

For a moment he felt nauseated. Nausea not only in his stomach, but in his legs, too, in his arms and his shoulder. But suddenly his shoulder sank and the captain felt grass under his feet and his knees buckled.

Ahead of him the captain saw a bearded shirt, an epaulette and a piece of flesh on a bayonet...

...His flesh, Captain Nezelasov's...

"Pork cutlets... The Olympia restaurant... A Mexican Negro conducted the Rumanian... Aspen... Autumn...

"I thank you, Russia ... the world ... all slavdom ... for silence... Silence through the entire land..."

"Come o-on, strike'em..."

Striking, whirling, crumbling...

There was no train on the embankment. That meant it was night. He felt about under his arm—human hair, sweaty. Half a torn-off ear like a rag, a rent torn in it by a nail...

...A twig—in his hand. A twig could be easily broken off and even shoved into the mouth. It wasn't an ear.

A carbine across the shoulder! From the train, then?

Nezelasov felt relief. He could not remem-

ber how the cartridge-belt over his field jacket had got there.

A faint hope remained.

He roared with laughter.

The bush smelt glutinously of warm blood. A black, prickly wind blew from the hills, blew in long, wet streaks. Perhaps they were wet with blood...

Then Obab crawled by with the puppy under his arm. His riding breeches were like the wheels of a cart.

The pale-haired soldier stood to attention and reported quietly:

"Are your orders to advance?"

"Go to the devil! "

The refugee in the brown manteau whispered in his ear:

"They are going! They are going! "

Captain Nezelasov himself knew that they were going. He had to take up a convenient position. He crawled to the hill, raised the carbine and fired.

But one hand, it appeared, was missing. A single hand was awkward. He could rest the carbine on one knee. Then the foresight could not be seen... Why had he not shoot in the train, but here... .

Here he was alone, and crawling towards him ... look how many of them there were, bearded, the swine, their shots were hitting the ground, otherwise...

Captain Nezelasov fired frantically into the

darkness like this until all his cartridges had gone.

Then he laid his carbine aside, crawled down from the hill into a bush, thrust his face into the grass and died.

FOAM

XXVIII

In the fat, dark fields the kaoliang rustled smugly.

A copper Chinese dragon was rattling yellow jingling rings in the forest. And in the rings square grey boxes were rolling, jingling, rumbling...

Smoke, ash and sparks on the yellow scales of the dragon...

Steel rang on steel, hammering!

Smoke. Sparks. Kaoliang. Lush fields.

Perhaps the Chinese dragon was from the hills, perhaps from the forest.

Yellow leaves, yellow sky, yellow embankment.

Kaoliang! Fields!

By the door of the compartment a foxy-faced little old fellow, trying Ensign Obab's wide blue riding breeches for size, cried boyishly in a passionate voice:

"What a shame! Just like a skirt, but the knees are as naked as a baby's head! "

Ash on the table. Smoke pouring in through the windows.

The windows wide open. The doors wide open. The trunks wide open.

The little cast-iron Chinese god is on the floor, spat upon, grinning plaintively. Funny little oddity.

Beyond the embankment another god was crawling out of the hills, yellow, its cast rings jingling...

The kaoliang is fat, black!

The man's glance is fat and smug.

"Oh-ho-ho! "

"The end of the devils! "

"Eno-ough! "

The men grabbed at the locomotive, swarming over the steel with hot intoxicated bodies.

One man in a red shirt raised his fist threateningly:

"We'll show you! "

Who? Who would?

Noone knew!

But threats must always be made! Must!

A red shirt, a red bow on a grey greatcoat.

A red bow!

O-o-o-o!

"Pull, Gavrila-a! "

"A-a-a..! "

A bow.

Armoured train "Polar" No. 14-69 under the red flag. A bow!

On the copper red dragon from the hills—on the copper red dragon—a bow! On the copper red one!

A wheel had been here—in a moment it was two versts away, two versts. The rails were silent, not humming, cowed... Silent.

Aha!

A puny little soldier in sky-blue French puttees with a dagger.

"Melons don't grow well by the Irtysh ... there are more sun-flowers and water-melons. The people there are neither hard nor soft... I don't know what sort of people they are."

"Who knows about the people?"

"God himself gave it up as a bad job..."

"Oh-o! "

" 'To blazes with you,' he said! "

"Oh-o! "

The lithographed Kolchak in the toilet, on the floor. Orders on the floor, newspapers on the floor...

People don't notice the floor, they walk, unfeeling...

"A-a-ah! "

The "Polar" under the red flag...

Aha!

Enormous, important, the train floats over the wind—a scrap of red material. Bloody, alive, yelling: o-o-oh!

Peklevanov's spectacles try to leap on his

nose, unsuccessfully, he himself tries both in body and words to leap somewhere.

"It's on the brink of happening in America!"

Znobov yells:

"I know... I carried out propaganda with an American bourgeois myself! "

"We've heard about that a hundred times already! "

"In England, comrades:

Rise, you who are branded by a curse..."

"O-o-oh! "

His spectacles leaped on his nose. His eyes saw smoke, tobacco, machine-guns on the ground, rifles, cartridges like grain, peasants' hair, eyes that were oily, intoxicated.

"Comrades, the revolutionary committee, having the mission! .."

"We know! "

"That's enough... I want to yell myself! "

Night'ngale, night'ngale, li'l bird.
Canary!

Vershinin lay on the bed, breathing deeply and regularly, burning inside himself only—it was close from his breathing in the compartment, although the doors were wide open. Earthy air, heavy, peasants' air. Alongside was a woman. She had come from somewhere, moved entirely forward with her breasts, fluttering. Nastasyushka. Wife!

Znobov yelled:

"Found him at last? He's a good fellow! "

Oh, my buck-board, oh, my
jaunting car.

. . . . . .

The tobacco is smoked,
The boss has croaked...

Behind the door someone was drunkenly weeping.

"Vaska ... the swine, they killed Vaska... I'll rip open the bellies of five of them for Vaska—for Vaska and the Chinese... Swine..."

"The devil with them... Dogs..."

"I'll ... them ... for Vaska! "

XXIX

At night his wife came again; she gasped for breath and then grew still. In the moonlight her white teeth could be seen—cold and cooling to the body—and her body, too, could be seen, like her teeth, but warm and trembling.

She said what she had said before, childish words, and there was something childish in her, but in her arms there was a strength that was not her own, alien—earthy.

And in her legs, too...

"Ah ta-ta-ta! Ach! Ach! "

That was the armoured train, moving

towards the city, towards the sea.

The people were on the move, too.

Perhaps towards the same place, perhaps even further...

They had to go further, because they were people...

It is I who is speaking, I.

At night we are born as beasts, beasts!!

I know—and rejoice... I believe...

The earth smells—through the steel it can be sensed, although the doors are wide open and hearts are wide open. It smells of autumn grasses, subtly, joyfully and with a blessing.

The tender, nocturnal woods go towards a man, tremble and rejoice that he is master.

I know!

I believe!

The man trembles—he, too, is a leaf on an enormous and beautiful tree. His heaven and his earth and he is heaven and earth.

The darkness is dense and blue, the spirit dense and blue, the earth joyful and intoxicated.

It is good, good to believe everyone, to know and love everything...

It all should be and will be—always and in every heart!

"O-o-oh! "

"Syenka, Styopka! Hobgo-oblin! "

"Go on! "

These people have a throaty roar—they are

in steel clothes, maybe they rejoice in them, the steel leaves bend, the enormous locomotive shudders and the darkness crawls away with a fat rumble:

"O-o-oo-a ... oo-oo-oo! "

The armoured train "Polar"...

The whole line knows, the city knows, all Russia... By Lake Baikal, no doubt, and on the Ob...

Aha!

A station.

A Japanese officer emerged from the gloom and approached the armoured train with an even, alien tread. An alien strength, hidden in the darkness, could be felt behind him and probably because of that the mood was cheerful, a little cold and a little frightening.

Znobov walked towards him. At first there was just a crowd of Znobov's men—shaggy, with thick hair—but then one man detached himself.

The officer extended his hand quickly and dexterously and said in Russian, deliberately mangling the words:

"We—nootr'ls! "

And he began to speak ringingly and commandingly in Japanese, raising his voice. There was scorn in his voice and a kind of incomprehensible boredom. And Znobov said:

"Nootrality, that's fine, only how many of you are there?"

"Toowenty t'ousand," the Japanese said, then turned in military style and walked away, somehow redundant and again wholly alien.

Znobov stood still for a moment, also turned and said to himself in a whisper:

"But there are a million of us, you swine!"

And to the partisans he explained:

"They're afraid. They're nootrals, they say, and they want to go back to their islands and grow rice... To hell with them, let them go! "

And he spat his annoyance into the palm of his hand.

"And they'd shake your hand too, the stinkers! "

"The only way is to hang them! " the partisans decided.

Weeping, an officer with a girlish, small pink face was led out. He wept in a girlish way, too—with his eyes and lips.

Lame, an empty, dirty bag thrown over his arm, a peasant went up to the officer and struck him with his free hand on the bridge of his nose.

"Don't whine! "

Then the escort, seeming to remember something, swung his arm and jumping forward, as if performing drill, plunged his bayonet between the officer's shoulder-blades.

A station.

A yellow lamp, yellow faces and black earth.

Night.

On a cot in the compartment was a woman. His wife. Beside her lay her black clothes.

Vershinin rose and went to the office.

"Write! " he declared to the fat clerk.

The clerk was drunk and did not understand.

"What?"

And Vershinin himself did not know what should be written. He stood for a while, pondering. Something had to be done, someone, somehow...

"Write..."

And the drunken clerk wrote in handwriting as fat as himself:

"Order. By resolution..."

"It doesn't matter," Vershinin said. "It doesn't matter."

The clerk agreed and fell asleep, putting his fat head on the frail little table.

"I've been through many lands and seen many peoples of all kinds..." the puny soldier in sky-blue puttees said.

Znobov had golden moustaches and golden eyes, greedy and caressing. They were saying:

"Where are you from?"

The little soldier began his cheerful tale. He wasn't believed and he himself did not believe in what he said, but everyone enjoyed the story.

Cartridge-belts on the floor. Cartridges like grain and partisans' trousers drying on the machine-guns. Dried blood on the barrels, like decayed, claret-coloured silk.

"Once the shah of Persia travelled through the lands of Turkestan and he encountered the English queen..."

XXX

The city met them quietly.

While they were still at the station a guard had said timorously:

"We haven't heard about any uprisings. Mebbe there have been, though—the railway's our business. The wages are small, well, you see..."

His beard was greyish, like decayed dung, and he smelt of the hen-house.

At the main station officers rushed in fright about the station-master's office, tearing off their shoulder-straps. By the platform drivers shouted joyfully from their trucks. Workers were coming from the depot.

Peklevanov was fussing by Vershinin.

"We'll have to begin, Nikita Yegorych."

Partisans were jumping from the carriages with machine-guns and rifles. They were almost all without hats and had drunken, narrow eyes.

"Nuffin?"

"Put the machine-gun..."

"Get us a car! "

Trucks drove up. Glass rang in the station-master's office and there were revolver shots. Some pale young ladies hung a torn red banner in the first-class buffet.

The workers applauded loudly. Znobov shouted something incomprehensible. Peklevanov sat in a truck and smiled vaguely through his glasses.

The dead were brought on a cart.

An old woman in a pink kerchief wept. An arrested priest was escorted past. The priest was talking cheerfully and the escort chuckled.

A clean-shaven American leaped on to a pile of sleepers and clicked the shutter of a Kodak several times in succession.

At General Spassky's headquarters nothing was known.

Girls with big hairdoes tapped on typewriters.

Officers with yellow stripes down their trousers ran up and down staircases and along corridors that rang like violins. In the entrance hall a canary sang in a cage and an orderly slept on a wooden form.

Suddenly the trucks emerged from round a corner. The crowd, throwing itself at the gates, let out a hollow cry. Trams began to ring their bells, cars hooted their horns and the partisans ran up the staircases.

Again there was paper on the floor, ruined typewriters and, perhaps, people who had been killed.

A grey-haired general with little pink ears was led down the staircase. He was killed on the last step and dragged away to the form on which the orderly had slumbered.

A partisan ran down the staircase, supporting his stomach with his hand. His face was grey and before he was halfway down he cried out shrilly and suddenly wrinkled up his face.

A woman screamed.

Long trills continued to come from the canary in the cage.

A crowd of officers was escorted into the cellar. None of them noticed the corpse of the general lying by the staircase. The little soldier in sky-blue puttees and boots reflected sentimentally that it would be a good thing to cover a hero's corpse with the red lining of a greatcoat.

But the heroes were buried in the kaoliang...

The little soldier in the sky-blue puttees stood on guard by the entrance to the cellar in which the arrested officers were locked up.

In his hands was an English bomb and he had been ordered: "If anything happens, chuck the bomb in there—and to hell with them".

In the door of the cellar was a small, square blue window and lower down was an angular jaw covered with black hair and a wet, blink-

ing eye. Behind the door there was often an indistinct mumbling, as if people were praying...

The little soldier thought wearily: "Now, when I throw a bomb, will he jump away from the window or not?"

The bells of the tramcars did not ring. The feet of the crowd did not ring on the pavement. Yellow and thick, like the breath of a typhoon, heat oppressed the town. The houses, like the rocks of the hills, stood immobile and glum around the bay.

And in the bay, rocking easily and freely in the greenish-blue water, a Japanese minelayer lay silent.

In the entrance of the headquarters the canary poured out its thin trills, and somewhere, as always, there was weeping.

The plump secretary of the revolutionary staff, smiling with one side of his face, sat writing on a bench, although all the tables were unoccupied.

Four partisans ran past, talking quietly and excitedly. There was a smell of wet leather and tar...

The secretary of the revolutionary staff hunted for an ink-stamp, but Vershinin had departed with it. The secretary lifted an ink-well. He wanted to call someone...

...Far away a report sounded from the out-

skirts of the city. The shot boomed and did not seem to come from a rifle—it was enormous and heavy, shaking one's entire body...

Then, nearer to the main streets, slicing through the heart with joy, the streets roared with machine-guns, rifles, tramcars ... the shipyard roared...

The uprising had begun.

Also, two hours later, a warm and damp dark-green wind blew from the sea.

...Men in wide velveteen trousers and blue cotton shirts passed—miners. They had bony faces overgrown with grey, moss-like hair. Their round eyes used to the darkness of the stone gleamed.

Fishermen from the Zeya lakes, with long arms below their knees—to their calves—passed. They wore trousers of eel-pout skin and had long, thick hair like autumn grass, smelling of fish...

Also, shepherds from the Sikhote Alin range with Chinese, narrow-eyed faces and carrying the long-barreled rifles of their ancestors walked with a tempered, rock-like tread.

Also, thin-lipped men from the Khora River and large-chested fishermen from the gulf of St. Olga, used to sea winds, panted amid the reeds of the continent...

And more, and more—dark-faced peasants from the plains with an identical, even tread like that of a tired herd...

Vershinin went ahead in a car with his wife. His wife's large, powerful body, swathed in bright silks, burned. Her cracked lips were blood-red and her tight stomach stuck out. They sat unmoving, looking straight ahead, and the same wind that was blowing in the hills, solid, smelling of the sea, the rocks and sea-weed, stirred her dress...

The American correspondent stood on a bollard, leaning against a lamp column and scribbling with a pencil in a small note-book. He was clean and smooth, surveying the demonstration briskly, mouse-like.

Opposite him, across the street, stood the puny little soldier in a greatcoat that resembled a hospital gown, sky-blue puttees and English boots. He looked at the American over the people passing by (he was tired and used to demonstrations) and tried to fix the American in his memory. But the latter was smooth, slippery and evasive, like a fish in water.

1922

Afterword

Vsevolod Vyacheslavovich Ivanov (1895–1963) was a writer of great originality. He was active in Soviet literature for more than fifty years, travelling a complex and sometimes dramatic path of creative experiment. Fearing creative stagnation and repetition more than anything else, he worked in the most widely differing genres (the novel, the novella, the short story, drama, the sketch, the essay), displaying boldness and a willingness to try new methods in each.

Ivanov made a brilliant debut as a writer of front-rank importance. "I didn't begin like that," Gorky said. The boldness with which Ivanov's prose pioneered a new historical reality was striking. Moreover, this reality was interpreted by the young author not in its

individual manifestations but in its fundamental aspects. Naturally, the clash between Man and History comes first in his writings.

His experience of life, which nourished his natural gifts, was varied and rich in impressions that were unusual and extremely vivid.

The son of a parish primary school teacher in the village of Lebyazhye near Pavlodar (in present-day Kazakhstan), Ivanov left home early. He spent many years as a wanderer, working as a type-setter in the print-shops of Pavlodar and Kurgan and appearing as an Oriental magician in circuses touring Siberia, the Urals and Kazakhstan.

Vsevolod Ivanov's first stories appeared in Siberian periodicals between 1915 and 1917, but the Revolution made him a mature artist.

At the beginning of 1921 Vsevolod Ivanov arrived in Petrograd. He was the author of a small book entitled *Forked Sticks* (1919), which he had set up in print himself. The credentials with which he arrived from distant Siberia bore the words "On assignment to M. Gorky". Ivanov received his first letter from Gorky as early as 1914. It inspired the young writer to take himself seriously in hand. Until the end of his life Gorky never ceased to follow the career of his literary "god-son".

Partisan Stories, published in 1921-22, brought Vsevolod Ivanov nation-wide fame and was immediately translated. The author

selected three works—"Partisans", "Armoured Train 14-69" and "Coloured Winds"—for his *Partisan Stories*. The directness of his impressions was reflected fully in these novellas. Vsevolod Ivanov himself fought in the partisan struggle in Siberia and the living breath and peculiar note of the time, as well as its spirit, are manifested in his books with rare conviction.

Partisan Stories, like the works of Ivanov's contemporaries written at the very beginning of the 1920s (by Andrei Malyshkin, Lydia Seyfullina, Artyom Vesyoly and others), conveys to modern readers an image of the times that has depth and breath and is, as a rule, presented with lyrical overtones. While unquestionably enjoying precedence, this image does not, in Ivanov's books, rule out artistic penetration of the inner world of the characters and the underlying causes of events. In *Partisan Stories* the general over-view and the particular interact, each enriching the other.

The power of "Armoured Train 14-69" lies in the unity it achieves between a three-dimensional, powerfully emotive picture of the world and a profound analysis of the "constituents" of this picture (each of the two warring camps, the individual characters and their actions, thougths and feelings).

"Armoured Train 14-69" records the concluding stage of the Civil War in Russia, which unfolded in the highly individual conditions

of Siberia and the Far East.

During the opening stage of the war (the first half of 1918), Soviet power was victoriously asserted almost everywhere. The next stage commenced when Admiral Kolchak arrived in Omsk in October, 1918. Kolchak soon established a military dictatorship and proclaimed himself supreme ruler of the Russian state and supreme commander-in-chief of all counter-revolutionary forces. At first the Siberian peasantry showed only passive resistance to the demands of the Kolchakite authorities, refusing to carry out forced labour or to pay taxes, failing to respond to military conscription, etc. However, in 1919 they moved on to the offensive. Recognition by the peasants of the irrefutable fact that Kolchak's rule presupposed the incursion of foreign interventionists into a Siberia that had never known an invasion proved decisive here. Even before the appearance of Kolchak Japanese invaders had landed in Vladivostok on April 5, 1918, while on July 6 of the same year the Entente declared Vladivostok an international zone and proceeded to land large-scale invasion forces, the bulk of which were made up of Japanese and American troops.

By the beginning of 1919 there were 150,000 interventionists in Siberia and the Far East, united under the overall command of General Jannin.

The situation was aggravated by the counter-revolutionary mutiny of the Czechoslovakian corps. This had been formed in Russia during World War I from prisoners of war captured from the Austro-Hungarian army and Russian subjects of Czech nationality. After the Revolution the corps' command, incited by representatives of the Entente, demanded that the Soviet government send it to Western Europe. The decision was to evacuate the corps through Vladivostok on condition that most of its arms be handed over to local Soviets. By the summer of 1918 trains carrying the Czechoslovakian corps stretched 7,000 kilometres along the Trans-Siberian Railway. Over the entire length of this line counter-revolutionary mutiny broke out, fomented among soldiers deceived by the corps' command, which consisted of Cadets and right-wing Socialist-Revolutionaries. At the end of 1918, as Kolchak's troops went down in defeat, the Czechoslovakians refused to fight on the side of the White Guards and were withdrawn from the front. In the course of 1919 and 1920 the soldiers were gradually repatriated.

The partisan struggle in Siberia in 1919 assumed enormous proportions, developing into a true partisan war. The fact that the Siberian and Far Eastern peasants had not known the oppression of landowners and could not, therefore, accept the violence and tyranny

spread by Kolchak also had an unquestionable role to play.

The partisans paralysed the entire Siberian railway by sudden, rapid blows, disrupting the supply of arms and food to the white-guard front. The partisan struggle undermined the morale of the interventionist and Kolchakite troops. By the middle of 1919 the partisan movement had seized a part of the Altai and the Tomsk, Yenisei and Irkutsk provinces and by the summer and autumn of 1919 the crisis of Kolchak's rule was at hand. Kolchak's rear was in complete disorder. Before the Red Army arrived approximately 100,000 Siberian partisans had liberated large areas of Siberia.

Real historical contradictions and clashes—the savage struggle between the two camps, the doom of the White Army and the historical legitimacy of the victory won by the defenders of the revolution—are embodied in Ivanov's novella by consistently artistic means.

"Armoured Train 14-69" is a highly dynamic work, its vitality springing above all from abrupt switches between two levels of portrayal. Ivanov resorts, as it were, to the method of montage. Scenes in the camp of the Reds and episodes in the White camp alternate sharply, taking place not in sequence but simultaneously, which lends an especial tension to the contrast formed by the opposition of the two camps and their mortal hostility to each other.

The epilogue of the entire Civil War, not just of its eastern front, unfolds in the pages of Ivanov's novella. Thus the defeat of the White movement is shown with arresting clarity and vividness.

The external portrayal and inner characterisation of Captain Nezelasov, commander of armoured train 14-69, reveals the doom of a defender of the old order and, at the same time, the drama inherent in a person's recognition of his own inevitable defeat. "We are flowing together, like pus from a wound ... out to borderlands... Us! Everyone—the refugees and the governments that have drowned in the snow... Our homeland has cast us out! " Foreign to the environment of Siberia and cooped up in a stifling box, Nezelasov's soldiers ooze the painful sweat of fear and weakness. The commander, gripped by hysteria, is on the verge of madness. The armoured train itself, a strong and dangerous opponent, bears the same stamp of dying agony: "The train shook with a convulsive shudder and was hot all over, like a sick person raving with typhus."

The partisans bring with them the moral health, naturalness and strength inherent in people who live a life in harmony with nature. Masters of Siberia's mountains and forests, they tread the land silently and firmly.

The partisans and Siberia's natural environment itself, marching with them against the

enemy, form the living natural force opposing Nezelasov's soldiers. People, forest and land have all merged in a gory harvest.

Ivanov combines a large-scale account of the mortal combat of two worlds with attention to each character of "Armoured Train 14-69". Behind the general wave of enthusiasm uniting the men—"Don't give the land to the Japane-ese! We shall take it all back! Don't give it away! "—we see the individual motivation of particular characters. The new world, filled with dramatic events, is interpreted by the partisans on the basis of their own pre-war lives and their social experience, which is usually limited. Naturally, this process of interpretation is very difficult for them. The Chinese Sin Bin U, for example, grasps the secrets of a world that is in many respects incomprehensible to him by filtering his impressions through the familiar situations of the Oriental legend: "The Red Dragon took the gates of life from the girl Chen Hua and then the rebellious Russian was born." The other partisans, too, resort to legend—this time biblical—in their attempts to explain to "a man from a strange land"—an American prisoner—the meaning of their struggle. Znobov and Vaska Okorok, who once worked in the Siberian mines, are marked by the romanticism and utopian thinking of many truly devoted, selfless but naive defenders of the revolution.

Nikita Vershinin, the partisan leader, is by no means a romantic: he is a realist and, in his own way, a philosopher. Vershinin represents a human type that greatly interested Ivanov at the beginning of the 1920s. A strong, intelligent man with a firm will, he exemplifies most fully and graphically the character of the masses—their interests, traditions and prejudices. But he also expresses the peasants' traditional search for truth, the lot of a few, who not infrequently abandoned their prosperous farms to pursue the meaning of life.

Vershinin understands the importance of the events in which he has become involved. "Life like log cabins had to be built anew, as their forefathers had, coming here from the Perm lands into a wild territory and noone could tell whether they would succeed.

There was much that was incomprehensible..."

Life had to be built, like log cabins, although there was much that was incomprehensible. Action could not be delayed until everything had become clear. And Vershinin acts decisively and independently. However, the "incomprehensible" lives in him and during his brief moments of relaxation confusion breaks through. The dark veil over the future weighs heavily on him and he is tormented by doubt in the correctness of the path along which he is leading his men.

The importance of *Partisan Stories* in the

history of Soviet literature was assured by the truthfulness of this "picture of life" taken at an unprecedented, contradictory turn.

Town and country, the spontaneous peasant movement and the conscious will of the Bolsheviks. The complexity of these issues was exposed by the revolution. While showing the independent quality of the people's uprising, Vsevolod Ivanov also depicted the rapid Bolshevisation of the peasants during the period of Kolchak's rule. However, in his portrayal of the Bolshevik Peklevanov, chairman of the town revolutionary committee, the author of "Armoured Train 14-69" did not attempt a comprehensive characterisation of the Bolshevik as the leading figure of that era. He concentrated his attention solely on those qualities that were revealed in Peklevanov's relations with the peasant masses, in many respects combining his own vision with the view taken by the peasants themselves of this man, who was still in large measure beyond their comprehension.

The partisan theme dominated Ivanov's work in the early 1920s: apart from *Partisan Stories*, his writings on the partisans include the novel *Sky-Blue Sands* (1922-23) and the collection *The Seventh Bank* (1922).

The basic motif of the *The Seventh Bank* is that of change and movement: the Civil War shook the stagnant, peasant Siberia, its villages and detachments of soldiers, from their

immobility. This theme is embodied in Ivanov's novellas dating from those years by means of poetic leitmotifs.

Thus, the central image of the story "The Gullies" is enshrined in its title: the "gullies" fertile, rich land.

The smug village in which Aksiniya, the heroine of the story, lives, is surrounded by "gullies" and is hostile to the "road", which links it with the revolutionary town. The "road" is a symbol of openness to the world, of desire for movement. At the point in the Civil War which is presented in the story the "gullies" are taking over the "road", which is becoming overgrown with weeds. The village is being swamped by the gullies, snarling at those who come along the road. The central episode of the story—the halt made in the village by a group of Kirghizians fleeing from hunger and death—springs from the confrontation between the images of the road and the gullies.

The contrast between the "gullies" and the "road" is also the key to Aksiniya's emotional state. In rejecting the gullies, Aksiniya is drawn towards the road that leads to the town—the far-off, hunger-stricken town. From it people who were barely alive come to the prosperous village, the ferocious and well-fed village dogs snapping at their heels. Her heart, full of unexpended maternal love, bleeds with pity for the town, that "sickly

and pathetic infant". At the end of the story the image of a pining heart develops into an image of the heart as a "burning birch-bark". The mute grief of the heroine breaks through as a cry, an unanswered and lonely complaint, like a lonely road swallowed up by the rich grass of the gullies.

Vsevolod Ivanov's short novels of the mid-1920s (the cycle of *Exotic Stories*) are essentially linked to *The Seventh Bank* cycle, both in subject matter and in generic and stylistic characteristics, but are distinguished by notably greater variety. The broad-brushed creative quest that marks *The Seventh Bank* is superseded by penetrating investigation. A special place among the *Exotic Stories* is held by the short series about a fakir ("How I was a Fakir" and "The Fakir's Last Performance") which are autobiographical.

"Why did I call the book *Exotic Stories*?" Ivanov wrote in *The History of My Books*. I meant to be slightly tongue-in-cheek. There was nothing exotic in it. These were principally stories about the Civil War, written, perhaps, in a bit too colourful style and maybe just a bit overloaded with metaphors."

However, despite the writer's declaration, the title is not without a point.

Ivanov chose tense dramatic episodes from the past war for the stories he wrote in the mid-1920s. But the uncommon often borders on the exotic, although the latter was not of

the traditional voluptuous, intoxicating character but belonged to the harsh, sometimes merciless "exoticism of war".

The unexpected, "fantastic" aspect of the revolution emerges graphically in his many exotic stories, but is evident with especial force in such narratives as "The Debt", "The Desert of Tuub Koya" and "The Encounter".

The tense, dramatic plot of "The Desert of Tuub Koya" unfolds within the framework of a lyrical landscape that sets the tone of the entire narrative: "That tough grass! Stones, let alone horses, would have been unable to crush or chew up grass like that. Is it not because of that why the crags in the mountains are crumbled and gnawed, like the teeth of horses that crumble against the grasses of Tuub Koya." The facts of the story are exceptionally dramatic. Omekhin's partisans have been driven by war into alien mountains and steppes. For years they have lived apart from their families in a state of constant tension and violence. Home, human warmth and love have been forgotten: death, dogging every step, lays down the rules of their life.

The staggeringly unexpected plot of "The Desert of Tuub Koya" could only have been woven under these special circumstances. The appearance of a Georgian woman prisoner throws the loveless, wandering life of the partisans into disarray and an explosion of passion draws to their deaths both Paleyka,

the brave commander, and three of his men.

The aesthetic force of this story is rooted in the contrast between lyrically unrestrained landscape descriptions, packed with images, and terse dramatic scenes (the bet, the passing of sentences, etc.). The finale of the story—the death of Paleyka at the hand of Omekhin—impresses the reader by its extreme restraint. The significant reducing of the story's "palette" to a minimum bears a wealth of meaning. The colour equivalent of its leading motif (love—death) is blue or sky-blue, which, in the popular consciousness, is usually linked to separation, grief and pain. The vivid colour associations deepen the plot, lending psychological compactness to tense action.

"The Desert of Tuub Koya", written in 1925 (the period of the *Exotic Stories*), was included by Ivanov in the book *Secret of Secrets* (1927). This fact alone confirms the intimate link between these two collections. However, the link is polemical, since it was specifically with *Secret of Secrets* that a fundamental change in Ivanov's work was associated.

The turn towards psychologism, which clearly manifested itself in Soviet literature of the mid-1920s, emerged, in the work of the majority of Ivanov's contemporaries, in the novel. Ivanov, however, chose the short novel and in this genre, too, which demands especial mastery, compression and economy, Ivanov

made his own psychological experiments.

The distinctive quality of inner life in *Secret of Secrets*, which struck contemporaries and evoked many unjust reproaches from critics, followed in large measure from the writer's choice of a particular prototype.

In *The History of my Books* Ivanov wrote that, among the multitude of people whom he came to know in his trips around the country, he was attracted by "the smallest—not physically, but in terms of their social standing. If, at moments when they are not aware of themselves very much, they are gripped by a yen for heroism, a yen that is not even fully comprehensible to them, a yen to accomplish something great, what, then, will they be capable of achieving when they understand, recognise, see their size?"

The characters of the stories from the *Secret of Secrets* ("Fertility", "The Field", "Treacherous Ice", "The Night" and "Smokotinin's Life") are peasants. Peasant life of the mid-1920s is interpreted in these stories as a distinctive stage in the complex development of rural Russia. At the very beginning of the 1920s the countryside experienced a spiritual upsurge. The tragedies and sacrifices which fell to the lot of the peasants during the Civil War opened their minds to new ideas and made possible lofty experiences and interests extending beyond the everyday and the economic. Ivanov showed this vividly

in *Partisan Stories* and the stories included in *The Seventh Bank* and *Exotic Stories.*

Peace came "after long wars" and the countryside plunged into its customary round of interests. This was no longer the countryside of old: the revolution had roused it. Nevertheless, by the middle of the 1920s, the active revolutionary renewal of the town had thrown the difficulties associated with this process in the countryside into especially sharp relief.

The author of *Partisan Stories* was clearly aware that the same forces which, during the Civil War, had impelled the peasants towards revolution—above all "land power"—were now, under new historic conditions, presenting another aspect and had been taken over by the defenders of traditional, unchanging life patterns. The story "Fertility" from the *Secret of Secrets* deals with this subject.

In "Smokotinin's Life", another important story in this cycle, Ivanov achieved with especial fullness and completeness the artistic goals that he had set himself in the period of *Secret of Secrets.* "I wanted to develop a style of clear simplicity while not losing sight of figurative detail and continuing strictly to select figurative associations that stressed the psychological depth of the story". "My collection of stories was a unique laboratory in the field of style". In "Smokotinin's Life" the new stage in the development of Ivanov's

short novel is manifested with the clarity of a poetic declaration: the psychological motivation of actions depends upon figurative associations and their figurativeness is concrete (based on details), there is no authorial comment on the actions of the characters and the hero's self-revelation is given in an extremely compressed form, amounting to a skimpy dialogue made up of disconnected remarks.

In the story of Smokotinin's love and death another life, underground and unaudible, flows beneath the visible surface of the plot. This subterranean current is created by an unbroken chain of poetic images which combine concreteness and ambiguity. The leading image of the story emerges from its very first page. Timofey wants to take back a shaving picked up by the widow Katerina from a building site. Katerina says: "That's enough" and releases the shaving. "It slowly slipped down and the end stuck in the ground, gently swaying before collapsing as if sighing ... and suddenly it seemed to Timofey that his heart had slipped as well as the shaving, had stuck up in the same way, swayed in the same way..." When he explains why he shot at Katerina, Timofey can find only the words "a shaving at my heart". Smokotinin strikes a peasant, "but the knife slipped and suddenly everything was upside down in Timofey's body. He clearly felt the bitter snow in his mouth, a staggering snow-drift—and the moon

slipped between his hands." The image of a heart slipping behind a shaving, of a heart grazed by a shaving, of a wounded heart—the leading motif of the story—contains the motif of love and death, insoluble and tragic.

Vsevolod Ivanov's stories of the late 1920s and early 1930s—"Letter T", "The Dinner-Service" and others—deal with a considerably wider range of subjects. Naturaly, their style also changes.

As a rule, these stories are set in the provinces or on the edge of large towns. The world of the provinces and of provincial towns at the end of the 1920s exercised a powerful attraction over Ivanov.

In artistic terms the encroachment of the new upon old, provincial ways is most frequently represented in Ivanov's work by means of the portrayal of the aging and dying. In the story "The Dinner-Service" this is presented in its purest form. The title contains the idea of the story. In Ivanov's characters of this period, men and women experiencing the fading away and ending of life in unaccustomed circumstances, the link between them and their past, familiar life is manifested above all in an attachment to old things, for the most part unnecessary, but which have become dear: they contain memories of youth, of happiness, of everything that has gone for ever. In the case of Katerina Ivanovna, the old woman in "The Dinner-Service",

the object is the family dinner-service which she has served "half a century, more than that, for seventy-five years".

Katerina Ivanovna's rebellion against her former idol is genuine. "A kind of bold spite" appears in the face of the old woman, formerly marked only by the signs of dying, and she is seized by "a gay and light boldness" at the moment when "sleep blew like a dry wind on her eyes".

In "The Dinner Service" the author again abstains from commenting upon events, relying upon a fine fretwork of images. The basis of his poeticism consists in the contrast between the fading away of an old woman and the triumph of nature's flowering. The scale of the contrast is great: "Outside it was August. Immense and sunny autumn was advancing on the town; both town and the birds in the sky throbbed and there was a great roar in the heart, too! But the old woman felt cold." The motif of lush autumn fruitfulness is also contained in the description of the sideboard, which has seemingly absorbed into itself the old woman's powers. Thus, the contrast arising from an entire series of pictures associated with the description of the sideboard explains why the old woman smashes the plates. This rebellion, for all its strangeness, seems neither paradoxical nor comic.

As the 1920s came to a close Ivanov ad-

dressed himself less and less to the novella and after 1929 he employed the genre only intermittently. However, his interest grew in the major genres of the novella and the novel. *The Tales of Brigadier M. N. Sinitsin* and the novel *Journey to a Country that Does Not Yet Exist* date from the end of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s. In 1929-30 Ivanov finished his novel *The Kremlin. The Adventures of a Fakir*, a highly original and compelling work, was conceived in the throes of his sincere and long-lived enthusiasm for the novel. Ivanov continued to write novels in subsequent decades: *Parkhomenko* (1938-39), *We Go to India* (1955-59) and *The Volcano* (1940-1963).

The novella re-emerges in Ivanov's work during the 1940s and 1950s in his so-called "fantastic cycle". This cycle included works belonging to various genres, its integrity depending not on uniformity of genre but on unity of conception. The cycle contains the novellas "The Falcon", "Sisyphus, Son of Aeolus", "The Bronze Lamp", "Ahasuerus" and "The Overcase Leaf", the novellas "The Opal-Coloured Ribbon" and the novels *The Edessa Relic* and *The Treasures of Alexander of Macedonia* (which was left unfinished—sections from two versions of this novel were published).

The appearance of *The Fantastic Cycle*, which drew upon literary and folk-lore remi-

niscences, was natural for Vsevolod Ivanov, who constantly reflected on the problems of human history and the history of art.

Although the series of stories is called "fantastic", the fantastic—that is, the supernatural—is, in fact, absent from the majority of the works. Nevertheless, for Ivanov the title was fundamental. In using this particular title, he cautioned readers in advance against attempts to seek direct parallels with real life. For the author the word "fantastic" had become a synonym for the imaginary.

Work on the "fantastic cycle" became in large measure a means whereby Ivanov strove for self-knowledge in art.

The "mysterious" stories and novels discuss the meaning of life and the purpose and essence of art. In the course of the argument, Ivanov's view of art as such and, above all, of his own art is revealed.

One of the central issues of Ivanov's aesthetics concerns the correlation of Imaginary Conception and Truth and of Fable and Truth. This issue is examined in "the Opal-Coloured Ribbon", "The Bronze Lamp" and "The Falcon".

Fable and Truth do not stand counter to each other, Ivanov states in "The Falcon", a profoundly poetic novella set in the 17th century. Their relationship is a complex one. The core of "The Falcon" is to be found in the dispute between two Italian craftsmen,

who are leaving Russia for their homeland. Filipp Andzoletto is a spokesman for common sense, while the romantic Malprosta is a worshipper of beauty. The latter delightedly tells his companion the legend of the Russian prince Podzolyev, in whose story he sees confirmation of the lofty and eternal idea: "Man is entitled to love"—proclaimed by the geniuses of the Renaissance.

But now the Italian is confronted by Prince Podzolyev. The prince's life is not only more dramatic but also more prosaic than the life of legend. So, then, does this mean that Andzoletto is right—that the prince's love is a whim? Malprosta refuses to believe it. In spite of the "truth of life", he does not reject the "truth of legend". After all, legend reflected the supreme (possible!) version of the prince's life and the youth remains true to it, as he has remained true to Art, Beauty and Love. However, the author is more experienced and wiser than his central character: for him, one truth does not exclude the other—the sober truth of life and the wise, naive truth of legend, intersect and overlay each other. Thus the Truth itself, which Ivanov, the creator of "mysterious" stories and tales, confesses, is born.

In turning to legends, sayings and myths, Ivanov interprets them in his own way, filling them with a philosophical content and bringing them into profound harmony with the

modern age.

Sisyphus, the central character of Ivanov's eponymous novella, is caught at a moment of direct conflict with historical reality, which demands of him that he choose his own path in life. The "situation of choice" in which "historical man" unavoidably finds himself does not lose its familiar tension and drama in the conditions of myth, but acquires philosophical universality.

Why, after receiving the forgiveness of the gods and freedom, does Sisyphus refuse to begin a new life and return to his burdensome and useless labour? The answer grows organically out of the novella's entire system of symbolic imagery. We find this symbolism in the portrait of Sisyphus, a simple man (by no means a god!), a person marked by peasant concerns and labour, in the description of Sisyphus's everyday life, which is poor but organised with love and, finally, in his meeting with Polyander.

Sisyphus had the opportunity to choose between his own existence, as a rule joyless but harmless, and another life, so vividly depicted by Polyander, in which blood flowed and evil triumphed. Sisyphus did not want to take part in turning the earth into hell: it is better "to push useless stones against the wind than to sow swift-sprouting evil..." And so the hut by the hill, which had long seemed a temporary refuge, now appears to Sisyphus

his only home and the "labour of Sisyphus" more acceptable than any other.

The paradoxical quality of the author's logic, which marks the entire fantastic cycle, is clearly seen in the conclusion of "Sisyphus". "The fundamental subject of our novels is man—active and inactive," Ivanov noted in his diary. The writer regarded Sisyphus' inactivity as a denial of the activity of the Polyanders of this world, as well as of the warlords and emperors standing behind them. Sisyphus's decision carries a negative emotion with it: the author's view of his central character is sober and a little sad.

However, it is not without reason that Sisyphus is illuminated by the crimson light of victory during the very last lines of the story. We know that the gods dispose of the fates of mythological characters. The logic of myth excluded free will, which is manifested in the taking of independent decisions, while the very concept of "choice" was inapplicable to mythological situations. Ivanov humanises the myth and interprets the image of Sisyphus in the context of his own time, emphasising the independence and freedom of the choice made by his central character. He finds the strength for his act within himself, sparing a glance neither for the gods who have hitherto controlled his fate nor for other people (Polyander and the entire world of Corinth). Sisyphus is, therefore, a victor, although his

life has remained what it was. He has chosen his own lot: it has not been imposed on him—he has not been forced to accept it.

This turn in Sisyphus' bitter fate reflects the author's humanistic belief in the independent and proud strength that lives perpetually in man.

"I am glad that I am alive," Ivanov wrote in 1922 in his autobiography. "The intoxication of creativity, the intoxication. The bushy, fluffy flame of life," he wrote in the last book he published during his life time (*Intoxication, or Towards the Autumn Birds*). The lofty truth of his books was always imbued with love of life and faith in man.

The present volume is composed of writings published in eight-volume *Collected Works of Vsevolod Ivanov* (Khudozhestvennaya literatura Publishers, 1973-78), which brought together the author's work in a multiplicity of genres: novels, novellas, short stories, plays, essays, articles and sketches.

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